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STORIES**

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**I HATE TO TELL
HIS WIDOW!**

by **LOUIS L'AMOUR**

**WHAT DO YOU
WANT—BLOOD?**

by **WM. CAMPBELL
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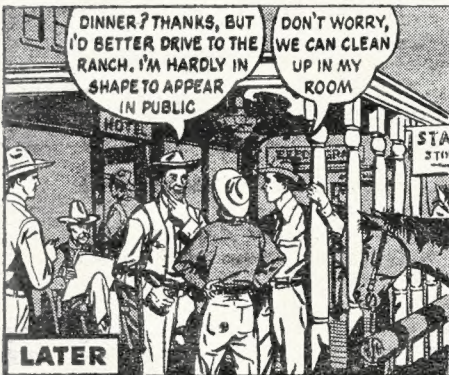
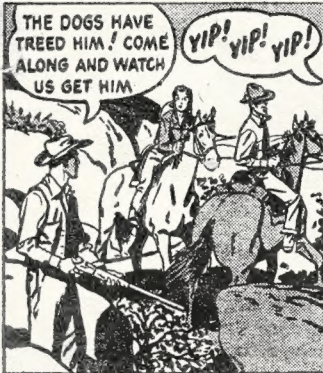
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15
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VOL. FORTY-TWO

JULY, 1949

NUMBER FOUR

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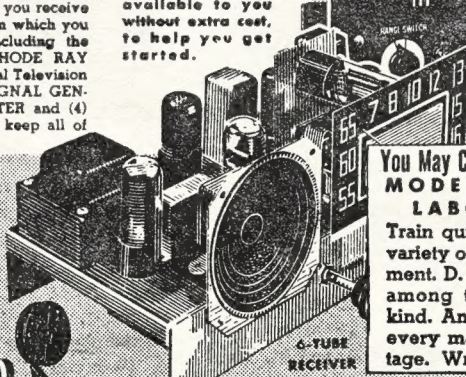
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For A Western: "Stampede" with Rod Cameron, Gale Storm, Don Castle and Johnny Mack Brown (Allied Artists).



A dam on the ranch of Tim and Mike McCall (Don Castle and Rod Cameron) is cutting off the water supply from the grazing land of some new settlers. Connie (Gale Storm), one of the settlers' daughters, tries unsuccessfully to get them to open the dam but only succeeds in infatuating Tim. He is killed protecting the dam from dynamiting. On a second attempt to destroy the dam, the settlers stampede the McCall cattle. Mike McCall loses the cattle but saves the dam after a vicious gun fight. Mike makes everything right in the end with Connie and the settlers. *Some inevitable aspects of a "Western"—cows, cowpokes, settlers—but a rootin' tootin' film.*

For Sports: "Champion" with Kirk Douglas, Marilyn Maxwell and Arthur Kennedy (United Artists).



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For Mystery: "Lust for Gold" with Ida Lupino and Glenn Ford (Columbia).



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For Adventure: "Scott of the Antarctic" with John Mills, Derek Bond, Harold Warendor, James Justice and Reginald Beckwith (Eagle-Lion). Technicolor.



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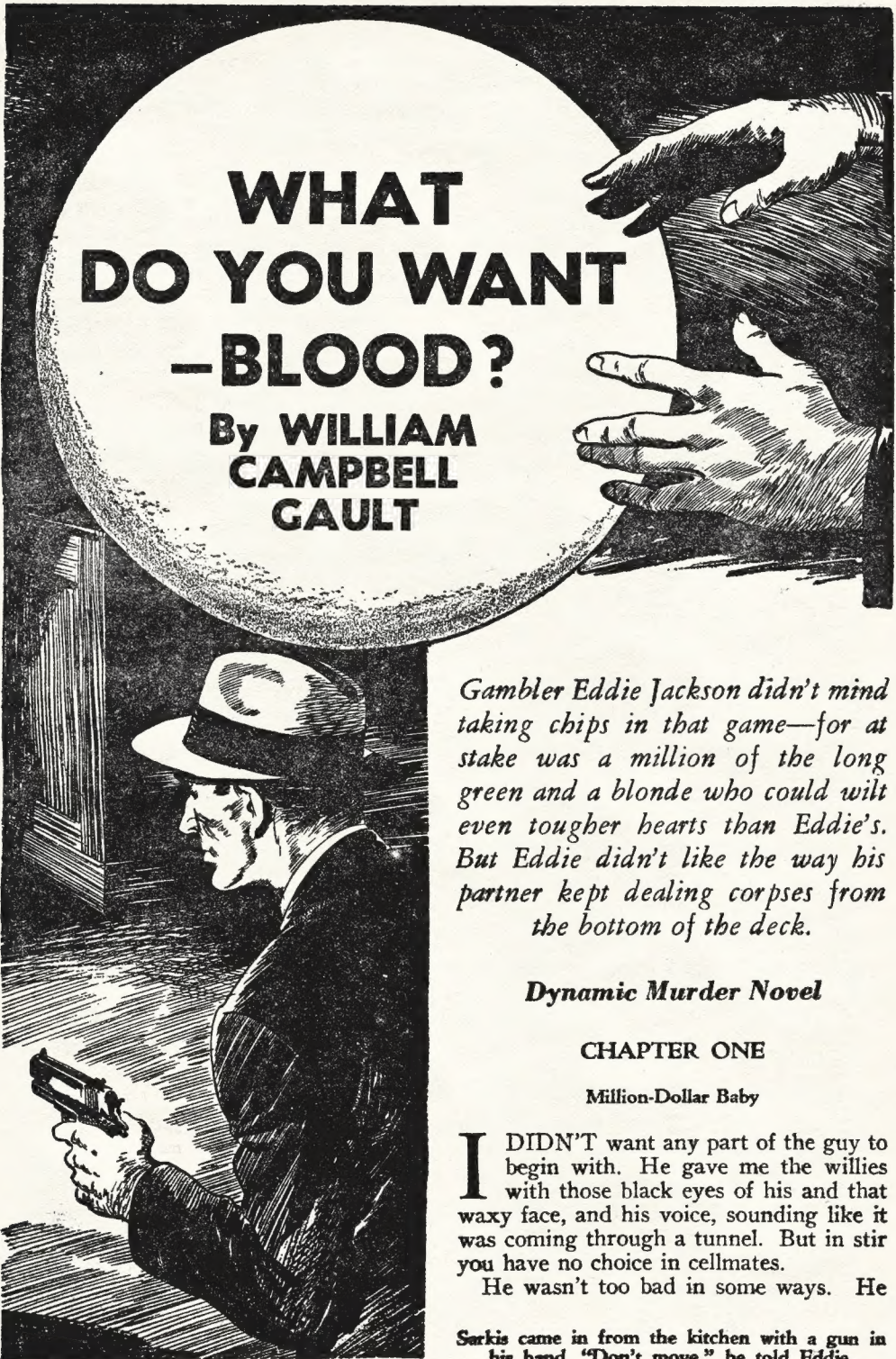
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WHAT DO YOU WANT —BLOOD? By WILLIAM CAMPBELL GAULT

Gambler Eddie Jackson didn't mind taking chips in that game—for at stake was a million of the long green and a blonde who could wilt even tougher hearts than Eddie's. But Eddie didn't like the way his partner kept dealing corpses from the bottom of the deck.

Dynamic Murder Novel

CHAPTER ONE

Million-Dollar Baby

I DIDN'T want any part of the guy to begin with. He gave me the willies with those black eyes of his and that waxy face, and his voice, sounding like it was coming through a tunnel. But in stir you have no choice in cellmates.

He wasn't too bad in some ways. He

Sarkis came in from the kitchen with a gun in his hand. "Don't move," he told Eddie.

didn't snore, and he wasn't always grinding about what a bad deal he got, and he kept himself clean. I could have done worse, I suppose. Or maybe not.

One winter night when things were quiet around the clink he asked me, "Ever have any experience with hypnosis, Eddie?"

"Not much," I said. "In the Army, I volunteered at a camp show for one of those acts where they put you in a trance and make a damned fool out of you. That was my first and it's going to be my last experience."

He smiled like a croupier at a heavy winner. "And did this man make a fool out of you, Eddie?"

"I guess he did," I said, "though I don't remember it. But the boys told me he put me through the hoops."

"What was his name?"

"Let's see—Rubin Jerrel, or something like that."

"Verrel," he said. "Rubin Verrel. I know him well. He isn't much of an operator, though. You're easy game for a hypnotist."

"Could be," I said. "That your pitch, Ames?"

"It was," he said, and went over to look out the slit they call a window. There wasn't anything he could see but sky, and not even that at night. Maybe he was counting the stars.

"It was," he repeated. "But I'm beyond that now. It's not a 'pitch' any more. I've developed the power fully." He turned to face me.

You'd think he was on the stage the way he stood there. "When you were in that trance, Eddie, you did just as Verrel directed. But any sharp noise, any kind of forcible contact, would bring you out of it. I could put you under my power, Eddie, and you'd *never* come out of it." His eyes were burning. "Until I brought you out of it."

"Sure," I said. "You should have tried it on the judge."

He looked at me for a second and then turned around to look out the window again.

Down the cell block a way, some guy started hollering and a couple of the others joined in. But the guy who was hollering was sick. I could tell that by his voice.

Harlow Ames said, without turning, "Richards. Appendicitis."

"Doesn't sound like Richards to me," I said. "And that's a new way of figuring the trouble—by the yell."

"Richards," he said again. "Appendicitis."

Then he went over to his cot and lay down on his back, staring at the ceiling.

IN THE chow line next morning I asked Richards' buddy, "Anything wrong with your boy?"

"Appendicitis," he said. "Didn't you hear him hollering last night?"

In the line next to me Harlow Ames smiled that conceited Undertaker's Special of his.

"You're still in the clink, just the same." I told him.

He nodded. "But not for long."

After breakfast I didn't see him again all day. I worked in the license plate shop and he was up in the office somewhere. But after supper we were back in the suite.

"You're a gambler, Eddie, aren't you?" he asked me.

"That's why I'm here," I said. "I gambled in the wrong company."

"Big stake gambler?"

"Big enough."

"Going back to it?"

"Not in this state, if I do. Some state, maybe, where it's legal. And maybe not at all."

"You're good looking," he said. "I'll bet you didn't have any trouble with getting all the ladies you wanted."

"None were ladies that I remember," I said. "What's it got to do with gambling?"

He didn't answer that. He said, "Ever get into a million-dollar game?"

I shook my head, saying nothing, wondering what he was leading up to.

"I've got a million dollars waiting out there," he said, "just waiting to be gathered in."

He went over to the window again.

I went over to my bed to write a letter. You hear a lot of talk like that in stir and if you show any interest you're likely to hear it all night.

"A million dollars," he said again, to the stars.

He turned around. I wasn't looking at

him, but I could sense that he was looking at me. "And legally," he said.

"Sure," I said. "Well, I've got to write a letter."

He didn't act as if he heard me. "How would you like half of it, Eddie?"

"I'd like it," I said. "I'll give you my address so you can mail it to me. Better send it special delivery."

He didn't say anything for seconds. Then he said, "Fool!"

I looked up. "Me?"

"You." His eyes were burning. "Do you think I'm like the rest of these—these jerks in here? Do you think I'm stir crazy? You want to see some letters? From an heiress? Do you know who Sheila Cotton it?"

"I've heard of her," I said. "I lost seven thousand dollars to her father one night."

"Her father put me here," he said. "He spent a lot of money framing me."

"Mike Cotton didn't look to me like that kind of gent," I said.

"Believe what you want to believe," he said. "I'm telling you the truth. Would you like to see her letters?"

"No," I said. "I believe you. Where do you figure me in this scheme?"

"You'd marry her," he said. "I'd suggest it to her. My word is her law."

"Why don't you marry her?" I asked.

"It would be a little too raw, for one reason. For a second and more important reason, I'm already married. Not happily, I assure you. But permanently."

"Too bad," I said. "Because I'm allergic to marriage. And especially marrying for money. And more especially making a racket out of it. You'll have to get yourself another boy, Ames."

"Will I?" he said, and the smile was there again.

A CELL is a small place. You've got to live in one to appreciate just how small it is. A two-man cell, anyway. It's like a tomb.

I didn't like any part of his plan that night when I hit the sack. A couple times in the night, when I woke up, I'd be thinking about it, though. The last time I woke up, Ames was standing by the window again, though I couldn't tell if he was looking out or looking my way. I had

a feeling of being constantly watched.

I began to hate the guy. There've been gents in my life I've disliked and quite a few who annoyed or bored me. I think Harlow Ames is the first one I hated.

I got away from him after breakfast and felt pretty good. There was a movie that night, so I'd be out of the cell for the early part of the evening, and I looked forward to it.

He never went to the movies, but he went to this one. And sat next to me. If you have to live with a guy you can't be as rude as you could otherwise. Besides, I really didn't have any reason for being rude.

The next night he showed me the letters. They weren't exactly what I'd expected. There was no mush in them, but there wasn't any doubt that Ames was her choice for Man of the Year. One line read, "My destiny is in your hands." Another, "I know you can't be wrong about anything."

When I'd finished them I said, "You really sold her a bill of goods, didn't you?"

He didn't answer. He handed me a picture.

She was a looker. Light hair and beautiful eyelashes, darker than the hair, and a full, rich mouth. Strictly the heart type. I looked at it for a long time, and when I looked up again Ames was going through his window routine.

He had his back to me. "Beautiful, isn't she?" he said.

"She sure is."

"And wealthy. What more would you want in a wife, Eddie?" He turned to face me.

"Nothing more," I said.

"Her money came from her maternal grandmother, Eddie. Her mother's dead. So the money is all in Sheila's name. And when her father dies, his money will be hers."

I didn't say anything.

"I'll take the letters now, Eddie, and the picture."

He stood there and I got up and brought them over to him. I don't know now if I wanted to or not, but I did.

He took the picture and the letters in one hand. The other he put on my shoulder. "I'm getting out Friday, Eddie. How about you?"

"About a month."

"I'll be waiting," he said.

* * *

He was, too. In a Caddy no longer than a freight car and wearing a suit even I couldn't find any fault with. And clothes are my religion. There was a foreign-looking dark guy behind the wheel.

It was April, the kind of April poets write about and the weatherman never delivers. I looked at the gates behind me and should have felt free, but I didn't.

"I've had your clothes brought over to my place, Eddie," Ames said. "You've exceptional taste."

The warden had said, "Keep your nose clean, Eddie, and you'll be all right."

There was a bus stop right across the street.

The little, dark guy was holding the rear door open, and I climbed in. Ames got in beside me, and the Caddy moved off, grumbling to herself in that expensive way.

I'm a guy who likes good living, and I was very short at the moment on blue chips. Maybe it was that.

He lived off Iona Court, in the Bayview Towers, an address that matched the Caddy. The Caddy was custom, and souped.

"Power," Ames said. "I love power."

I guess we all do, only with him it was a disease.

Some layout he had, sort of an Oriental modern scheme. Chinese Modern, he called it, pastel colors and light woods and oriental prints on the walls. The rugs were Chinese, and there's no rug gives the feeling of soft living like a pastel Chinese, a couple inches thick.

The little guy, I learned, was named Sarkis, and he did a quick change once we got home. When we walked in he was a chauffeur. A few minutes after Ames and I were seated in the living room he came back in with a tray of drinks. He was wearing a white jacket and black, silk-like trousers.

"You favor Scotch, don't you, Eddie?" Ames asked.

I DIDN'T even wonder how he knew it. I nodded and took the drink. It had been a long time since I'd had a drink. Ames took his and studied it. "This is

the first time I've seen you for a month, Eddie, but you came along with me. Do you realize what's happened?"

"I'm not sure," I said. He started to interrupt, but I held up a hand. "Maybe it was your—your power. Or maybe it was the million dollars. But I think it was the picture."

There was a frown on his waxy face now.

"When do I meet her?" I asked him.

"In about ten minutes." He'd stopped studying his drink, and was studying me. "You meant the half-million dollars, didn't you, Eddie?"

I finished my Scotch. "We aren't going to quibble over a half-million, are we, Ames?"

He just stared at me. Then Sarkis was there with another drink. I took it.

"I suppose you're joking," Ames said. "It's a poor joke."

"What are we arguing about?" I said. "I'm here. That's what you wanted, isn't it? I didn't want to come, but I'm here."

"That's right," Ames said and went back to his drink.

We were still sitting there saying nothing when the door chimes sounded.

"That will be Sheila," Ames said, and rose.

I stood up too and faced the archway to the hall.

No picture will ever do her justice. No photographer or artist can duplicate her coloring or catch the eager aliveness of her. No picture can show the grace of her movements.

I didn't have to be in a trance to fall in love with her.

"Harlow," she said, "Dad's furious."

Ames smiled. "Isn't he always? Sheila, I'd like to present Edward Jackson, a very dear friend of mine."

The overstatement of the week.

She turned to face me. She smiled.

I must have acknowledged her greeting, but I don't remember it now. I remember staring at her as though she was some kind of freak, and I remember her quick color.

Ames said, "Eddie's been admiring you from afar. He's the reason I had you come here today, Sheila."

She was frowning slightly. "Don't you know my father, Mr. Jackson?"

"I've played cards with him," I said. "I don't see much of him excepting across a card table."

"Who does?" she said.

Ames said, "What's your father furious about at present?"

She was coloring again. "Helen—I mean, your wife came to see him. I don't know what she told him, but he said. . . ." She paused to glance at me.

"It's all right," Ames said. "Eddie's in my confidence. Completely."

"He said," she went on, "that if I ever saw you again he'd send you to jail for the rest of your life."

I'd played too much poker to be fooled by the indifference on Ames' face. I could see he'd been hit.

Sarkis came into the room, and Ames said, "Something to drink, Sheila?"

"Nothing, thanks," she said. "Harlow, aren't you worried? Dad's serious. He's hired an investigator to follow me. I've no doubt the man's phoning Dad right now."

"I'm not worried," he said. "But it might be best if you'd leave." He was looking thoughtfully. "Why don't you and Eddie go over to Lytell's? I'll meet you there later."

"All right." Then she turned to me. "But maybe Eddie doesn't want to—become involved."

"I'll risk it," I said.

CHAPTER TWO

A Corpse on His Hands

LYTELL'S was a quiet restaurant over on Forty-first. We took a cab at the stand on the corner, and I saw the Plymouth coupe pull away from the curb behind us, after we got down about a block.

"Your guardian angel is following," I said.

She nodded without interest. She said, "Isn't Harlow wonderful?"

"I never noticed," I said.

She looked at me, puzzled. "You believe in him, don't you? You must believe in him."

I didn't say anything.

"He's my only contact with Tim," she said.

"Tim?" I said.

She nodded. "My brother. He was killed—in Italy, in the war." She was looking away from me, out the window of the cab. "He was—is my twin."

I said, "I didn't know Ames. . . . I mean, I thought he was just a hypnotist."

She turned toward me. "You *don't* believe in him. You're like my father. You think he's a fraud and a cheat."

"I didn't say that."

"Not directly, perhaps. But I know how I felt when I first went to him. I didn't go there because of Tim. It was just a lark. A friend of mine had heard of him, and we all dropped in on Ames, unexpectedly." She paused. "*Unexpectedly*, you understand? And he showed me Tim's face in the crystal, just as clearly. . . ." Her hands were trembling now, and she brought them up to cover her face.

I wanted to reach over and take her in my arms. I looked at the back of the cab driver's neck and said, "There are lots of things we don't understand yet, I guess."

"Harlow does," she said.

The cab stopped and I saw we were in front of Lytell's. We got out and I paid the cabbie. I took my time paying him, watching for the Plymouth coupe.

It pulled around the corner just as we went into Lytell's.

It was too early for dinner. I had Scotch and she had some tea.

I searched my mind for some way to tell her all the things I wanted to tell her, but it didn't seem like the right time. She talked about Tim a little, and about Harlow Ames, and about her father.

She talked sensibly. I couldn't see her as a stooge for Ames, but I'd read the letters. He had enough control over her to make her disobey her father. I'd have to go slow if I wanted to break that control. And I'd have to do it without Ames knowing I was fighting him.

Ames didn't show up by dinner time so we ate without him.

She was worried. She asked, "Do you think something's happened to him? Do you think my father might have—"

"He won't do anything he shouldn't," I said. "I'd like to see him, if I could, today. I'd like to talk to him."

"About. . . . Harlow?"

I nodded.

"Do you think it would do any good?"

"I don't know," I said.

She looked at me for seconds, and I was glad she couldn't read my mind. Then she said, "I'll phone Dad. I'll see if he's home."

He was home, and we drove right out there. He was in a small study, off the living room, and Sheila didn't come in there with me.

He looked at me as though I'd just crawled out from under a dead log. "You're working with Ames now, aren't you, Eddie?"

I shook my head.

"Don't lie to me. Say what you've got to say and get out."

He was a short, broad man and I wasn't afraid of him physically. But he wasn't in a state of mind I cared to tamper with. I told him about sharing a cell with Ames.

"He had the sign on me even after he got out," I told him. "But about three weeks after he'd left I got a rush of brains to the head. I went to the psychiatrist there and learned something about the racket."

"Don't bore me with what you've learned," Mike said. "I know the various stages, somnolence, catalepsy, amnesia. I've been to a psychiatrist, too. And I've been reading all the books I can find. He's got a bigger hold on her than any psychiatrist will believe."

"He's mastered post-hypnotic suggestion beyond any of them," I went on. "And he's got this spiritual angle. But he can be beat, Mike, and I'm willing to help."

He looked away. He lit a cigar and got up to walk over to the fireplace. After a while he said, "Sheila thinks you're on Ames' side, doesn't she? That's why she brought you up here."

"That's right."

"How do I know you're not?"

"Why would I come to you?"

Mike shrugged and studied his cigar.

"I know I've been followed," I told him. "I saw the gent in the Plymouth that's been tailing Sheila. He'd be an easy man to duck. Ames wants me to marry Sheila, Mike. There's nothing I'd like better. I didn't have to come here."

His face was set, his eyes like marbles. "You figured on marrying her without Ames' help, is that it? Lou don't want to

split Sheila's million dollars with him."

"Mike," I said, "don't be a damned fool."

"Get out," he said. "And stay away from Sheila."

"Listen, Mike—" I said.

But he was shouting at me now as if he'd gone crazy. He had reason enough for that, I guess. I got out.

The cab was still waiting, and Sheila was sitting in it.

"I heard him shouting," she said. "I'm going back to Harlow."

The light was only a dim reflection from the porch, but even in that I could see the strain and pallor of her face.

"You can't blame your father for being upset," I said. "He doesn't understand—"

"That's exactly it," she interrupted. "He doesn't understand. And he makes no effort to."

We didn't say any more on the trip back to the apartment. I looked for the Plymouth coupe a couple of times, but if he was following he was doing a better job than he had been.

I didn't want her to go to Ames, but I didn't want her to think I was fighting him, either.

HE was in the big living room, near the wall-wide windows that overlooked the bay. His head was bent, and one palm covered his forehead. It looked posed, to me.

He didn't get up or look up. He said, "You've been to see Mike Collins."

"That's right, Harlow," Sheila said, and looked meaningly at me.

Now he looked up, and his eyes went past Sheila to stare at me. "You wanted to help Mike fight me, didn't you, Eddie?"

I shook my head.

"Don't bother to lie," he said, and looked at Sheila. His waxen face was cold. "Eddie's a cynic, I'm afraid. I thought I could convert him, but I'm afraid I've failed."

Sheila looked at me, then back at Ames. "He went to talk to Dad about you, Harlow. He wanted to help you."

"You heard him talk to your father?"

She looked at me again. "I heard him," she said.

Ames put his head back into his hands.

"Perhaps I was wrong about Eddie."

I wasn't listening to him. I was wondering why Sheila had lied for me. It didn't seem possible she could feel about me as I did about her. My luck had never been that good.

Maybe thinking about it went to my head. Because I couldn't resist needling Ames a little more. I said, "I talked to Richards before I left, up there, Ames. He told me how you knew he had appendicitis."

I could almost see him stiffen. His voice was taut. "I don't know what you're talking about. Don't bother me now."

"The Doc told him that morning he had chronic appendicitis," I went on. "You almost fooled me with your gag that time."

His voice was muffled by his hands. "If you're suggesting I resort to trickery, if you're trying to sow some doubt in Sheila's faith, you can quit talking, Eddie. She's seen my power, and you've felt it."

Sheila was sitting in a dim corner of the room. She looked lost, bewildered. I wanted to go over and smash Ames' face, but that wouldn't help her. It would put me in a position where I couldn't help her.

Her voice was quiet. "I'd like to talk to Tim, Harlow. Perhaps Tim can tell us what to do."

He nodded. "I'll try. But conditions might not be favorable."

Sarkis came into the room, carrying a tray. I reached for a drink, then hesitated.

Ames said, "He's afraid we might drug him, Sarkis."

I took the drink.

Ames was at our end of the room now, and he pulled back a curtain to disclose a small alcove. The crystal ball was there, in a small cabinet. I pulled my chair around to get a better view as Sheila came over to take the chair next to mine.

Ames sat off to one side, his head in his hands.

The lights were dimmed and there was a faint glow that seemed to come from behind and below the ball. It was very quiet in the room.

The room was in darkness. The glow from the ball was the only light, and then

I saw the face forming. It was dim at first but got clearer. I could hear Sheila breathing beside me. I could hear, but couldn't understand, some mumbling from Ames.

I got drowsy, and the light seemed to be getting bigger and brighter. The voice I heard could have been a whisper or a shout; I was no judge of volume at the time.

"Trust in Harlow," I heard. "Father's going to come around, but don't antagonize him. Remember his temper. Be careful of new friends. Remember Dad's temper. Don't antagonize him . . . remember his temper . . ."

Then I saw Mike Cotton's face and saw him shouting again, but I couldn't hear his words. I could see his mouth working and see him raise his hand to strike me, and my own temper seemed to break loose and there was something in my hand. . . .

FOR a second, very clearly, I saw a neon sign, bright red, advertising some beer.

Then I was in some kind of whirlpool of color, and this piece of iron was in my hand, and I had a dry, rotten taste in my mouth, and the back of my head ached.

The light was dimmer, yellow now. I focused on it and thought I saw brown diamonds against the yellow light. I closed my eyes, opened them again. The diamonds were still there.

It was a table lamp. It had a yellow parchment shade studded with brown diamonds. It was on a library table near the window. I was on the floor and the piece of iron was in my right hand.

I got to my knees and the nausea came. A few minutes later I was on my feet, my vision back, my brain still woozy. There was a large bump above my right ear.

I looked around. At the desk, the fireplace, at the lamp again. This was the second time I'd been in this room. This was Mike Cotton's study.

About five feet from me, near the chair he'd sat in this afternoon, Mike was lying on the floor. There was blood congealing on his forehead. From the hairline up to the crown of his head, he was a mess. His eyes were open.

He'd been beaten to death.

I thought of the iron bar I'd been hold-

ing and the nightmare I'd had. *Don't antagonize him . . . Remember his temper . . .*

I heard the wail of a siren from far off, getting closer.

And I remembered the psychiatrist had told me, "He can't control you if you don't cooperate. Unless, of course, *he should drug you.*"

There wasn't anything I could do here, and there wasn't anything sensible I could tell the law when they got here. The whole thing was too pat. Even if I hadn't killed him, I was sure as hell going to burn for it if they found me here, now.

I didn't know if there were any servants in the house. It didn't seem likely. Just the same, I went out the side window and headed for the rear of the house.

It was practically open country where Mike lived—had lived. The street in front was a continuation of the bay drive; in the rear there were a few acres of uninhabited area.

I headed that way, going straight across toward a grove of trees to the south, trees and a couple of lighted houses.

There was a road in front of the houses, part of a new subdivision. About three blocks down this road, there was a sign, a red neon beer advertisement. I headed that way.

It was a tavern, a battered frame place with an open porch running along the entire front. There was a cab pulling in as I approached, my first lucky break of the day.

Two men got out, and I asked the cabbie, "You're not waiting, are you?"

"I've got another fare a block away," he said.

I pulled a ten from my wallet. "Not now you haven't."

He looked at the ten and at me. "Where to?"

"The nearest regular bus stop," I said.

"Let's go," he said.

It wasn't more than a mile, and he must have had the governor disconnected, because he made time. It was a terminal, and there were two buses waiting in the shed.

I got out in the lights of the shed, and the cabbie's eyes widened. "Look, Mac," he said. "If you've cut your hand bad, I'll run you right to a doc."

I looked down to see that my right hand was covered with blood. I looked back at the cabbie and said, "It's stopped bleeding. I'll be all right."

He took a good, long look at me. He'd remember me, all right.

CHAPTER THREE

Apartment 2-A

I GOT into the first bus ten seconds before it pulled out, heading back toward town. I sat in the back, a handkerchief around my right hand. It was Mike Cotton's blood on my hand, and I was running away. It was strictly a sucker play, but so would waiting have been.

I tried to think of some friend I could trust to take me in. But I was fresh from the clink and involved in a murder, and I couldn't think of any friend I'd trust in a spot like that.

The bus was traveling down Division now, past the Vidmark Hotel, past an all-night restaurant. I got out at the next stop and went back to the restaurant.

I had a couple cups of coffee after washing my hands in the washroom. I had some toast and eggs and more coffee. The big clock on the back wall read midnight. It was ten hours since Ames had met me with the Caddy.

I thought of that place and how I'd hated it, even for the short time I'd been in it. I thought of Mike, there on the rug of the study. And finally I thought about Sheila.

A uniformed cop came in and stood near the door of the restaurant. He seemed to be looking the place over. I kept my face down, away from him.

I didn't realize until he'd left, that I'd been holding my breath. My head was still throbbing, but not as bad as it had been. The bump over my ear was sensitive and just as big as ever.

The law would be too busy looking for me to be looking for anybody else. I thought of what they'd think if I pulled a hypnosis gag on them. Ames would be involved; but he wouldn't be nailed. Not while they had me.

I remembered what Ames had told me about his wife, and Sheila mentioning her again today. There were some phones in

the rear of the place, and I went back there.

There were a few Helen Ameses listed in the book but there was only one Mrs. Harlow Ames. My second stroke of luck for the evening. The address was Idlewild, not too far from Harlow's place on Iona.

I paid the cashier for my meal and started out. I was halfway to the door before I saw the broad back of the law, still in the doorway outside.

There was some wind but not enough for him to need any shelter from it. I slowed for a second, my legs weak. Then I went out, turned to face him.

"This is more like April," I said.

His eyes regarded me for a second, and then his big face turned jovial. "It sure is," he said. "Today was a fooler." Then his eyes were grave again, and he said, "Say, ain't you Eddie Jackson?"

I couldn't talk. I could only nod.

He put a hand on my shoulder. "You got a raw deal, Mr. Jackson. Just wanted you to know the whole force doesn't think the way the D. A. does." He grinned. "Not that I'd want you to quote me."

"I'll keep it to myself," I said, and grinned back at him.

"When'd you get out?"

"Today—well, it's yesterday, now. I'm a straight and narrow guy from here in, Officer."

"Sure, I suppose. But when I think of the games the D. A. gets into—well, good luck, Mr. Jackson."

"Thanks," I said. "Thanks a lot."

I went down to the bus stop. There was a cab standing near the restaurant, but cabbies make records, and I didn't want my uniformed friend to be checking records, once the alarm went out.

An east side bus came along, and I swung aboard.

It was an old apartment building but well kept up, red brick and three stories high. The apartments would be big, if old-fashioned. The outer lobby was no more than six by six, and the names and mail-boxes of the tenants were on the wall. One of the names was Mrs. Harlow Ames.

It was close to one o'clock, and there'd been no lights in any of the apartments

that I could see from outside. I went up to the door and saw that the last one in hadn't completely locked it before removing the key.

A dime did it.

The lower hall was too dry and too hot. From somewhere I heard the wail of a baby as I headed for the second floor.

It was on my right as I came into the second hall. 2-A. I stood outside the door for a second, listening. And hearing nothing.

I pressed the bell and the chimes sounded as loud as the city hall clock. I waited.

I thought I heard the *pat-pat* of slippers, and I didn't ring again. I waited. It probably was seconds, but it seemed like minutes.

A woman's voice whispered, "Who's there?"

"A friend of Mike Cotton's," I said.

The door opened a few inches, and I could see the chain across the opening and just a pale blur of a face. Silence.

"It's very important," I said. "For me and you too, probably. My name is Ed Jackson. Something's happened."

THE DOOR closed, then opened again without the chain, opened enough for me to see the woman standing there. She was wearing a red dressing gown, piped in white. She had a thin face, looking gaunt without the makeup, and bleached blonde hair. She had a small revolver in her right hand.

"Come in," she said, the revolver pointing at my middle.

I went in, and she closed the door and snapped on the overhead lights. From what I could judge of her figure, under the robe, it didn't match the rest of her. Her figure was perfect.

"You're Mrs. Ames?" I said.

She nodded, watching me closely, the gun steady in her hand.

"Mike Cotton's dead," I said.

For just a split second the gun wavered and she seemed to falter. I made no move for the gun. I stood there, looking at the rug.

"What . . . how did it . . ."

"He was beaten to death," I said. "Tonight. You can trust me. I think we're on the same side of the fence."

"You're staying with my husband," she

said. "You're in with him, aren't you?"

"Not any more." Briefly I told her about the nightmare, and finding Mike, and about the piece of steel I'd found in my hand.

She didn't lower the gun. "You were in jail with Harlow, weren't you?"

"That's right." I told her about that.

Now the gun was lowered, and she shook her head scornfully. "You're not in Harlow's class. What were you thinking of?"

"I don't know," I said. "Maybe Sheila Cotton. That was it, probably. Or maybe he had more moxie than I realized."

"*Maybe!*" The scorn was in her voice again. "From a cheap carnie mentalist to a couple million dollars. Don't ever make any mistakes about Harlow. He's got all the moxie any man needs."

"But I couldn't have killed Mike," I said, "Even under hypnosis, the prison psychiatrist told me, nobody would do anything against their moral code."

"Wouldn't they? How do you know what your morals are? How can you be sure if it's morals or the law keeps you from murder? You were in the service, weren't you?"

"That's different," I said.

"Sit down," she said, and snapped off the bright light overhead.

There was just the glow from a table lamp now, and she looked better. She must have been a beautiful girl at one time. With makeup she could get by in any league as she was.

Her face was haggard. "There's no damned reason I can think of why I shouldn't phone the law. Only I know Harlow. I know him better than anybody in the world. That's why I'm alive today. He's not completely phony, you understand. He's done a lot of studying, and he was no dummy to begin with. I never would have talked to Mike Cotton, excepting with the kind of money Mike offered no sensible girl could refuse."

The robe wasn't doing its duty properly, but she didn't seem to mind that. She looked down at her bare legs without seeing them. She looked up again.

"I gave Mike enough to put Harlow away for a couple months. When Harlow got out today Mike came to me again. I didn't tell him anything about Harlow,

nothing he could use. I gave him something to threaten Harlow with."

"About putting him away for life?"

"That's right. I've got it, and I've got it safe, in a place where nobody can get to it, unless they're bank robbers. I've got a lawyer who'll get to it if anything happens to me. *Anything*, you understand? Even if I'm missing for more than two weeks. So my dear husband isn't going to let anything happen to me."

"I guess he'd let anything happen to me, though," I said.

"You can bet on that."

Neither of us said anything for seconds. She must have guessed what I was thinking about.

Because she said, "I wouldn't go to bat against Harlow again, not for *anybody*, even as handsome as you. I'm his wife, and I can't be forced to testify against him. And I don't need the money. Mike Cotton took care of that."

I still didn't say anything.

"How about a drink?" she said. "You could probably use one."

"No, thanks," I said.

"Well, I can use one." She walked back toward what must have been the kitchen, her body moving very gracefully under the robe. When she came back she had a mixed drink in her hand.

"You ever been on the stage?" I asked.

"Some, nothing to mention."

"I can tell by the way you walk," I said.

"Save it." She sat down in the same chair, crossing her legs. She sipped her drink and looked at the ceiling, at the rug, at the door to the hall.

"All right," I said. "You don't need a meat axe. I'll go."

She looked at me. "Where?"

I stood up. "What difference does it make to you?"

"You can stay here," she said. "You'll be safe for a while here."

"Think of your reputation," I said.

"I'd rather not. Listen, Eddie, don't get the wrong slant on me. I'll stick my neck out a reasonable amount; but you're asking me to cut my throat."

"I haven't asked you for a damned thing," I said, "and I don't intend to. I haven't got that kind of money."

She called me a name I'd rather not repeat. "I said you could stay, didn't I?"

That's harboring a wanted criminal, isn't it? What did you expect from a stranger?"

"I don't know," I said. "You're all right, Helen. You've got enough troubles of your own, I guess."

"Oh, Lordy," she said. "Now we get that angle. Did you ever sleep in a closet?"

"No."

"Well, there's room here, in that big closet behind the day bed. You can swing the bed in after you. It's as good a place to hide as any."

"I'll take it," I said. "You're not afraid I'll make advances?"

She smiled at me. "I was afraid you wouldn't."

THERE was plenty of room behind the swinging day bed, all right, even if it did mean I'd be sleeping on the floor. I put a heavy quilt under me and slept like a man without a conscience.

It was the smell of bacon and coffee that woke me in the morning. The closet door had been left ajar, and I could hear the bacon frying. From the doorway Helen said, "The papers are here. Are you decent?"

I swung the bed out. "My picture?"

"Your picture, in both of them." She handed them to me.

Both of them had the same picture of me. One headline read, *GAMBLER SOUGHT IN COTTON KILL*. The other must have carried the original story in an earlier issue, for there was a picture of Harlow Ames next to mine and the headline read, *HOODOO MAN TELLS OF QUARREL*.

The cabby's account was there, and the patrolman's. The patrolman didn't reveal *all* of our dialogue. He did say, for the press, "He's a cool customer, all right. Fresh from a kill, and talking to me about the weather."

Helen said, "Sit down, cool customer, before your eggs get cold."

I sat down at the end of the table. "They've got me tried and convicted, and I'm not even caught yet," I said.

"An old tabloid custom," she said. "I hope you like your coffee strong."

I looked up at her. "You're not worried much, are you?"

She met my gaze. "Should I be?"

"Why do you think Mike was killed?" "You tell me."

"Because Harlow thought Mike knew what you knew. That was your idea, remember."

Her face hardened. "Don't involve me, pretty boy. Mike wanted some information he didn't get."

"But Harlow thought he got it. Harlow killed two birds with one stone, framing me and getting rid of Mike."

"If you're trying to work on my conscience," Helen Ames said, "it's back in Tulsa. I checked it there, when I was nineteen."

I looked at the picture of Sheila and said no more.

She was doing the dishes when she said, "That private eye Mike hired—he's the one gave Harlow his alibi, isn't he? He was with Harlow all the time, he claims."

"That's what the papers say," I agreed. "He claims he was hired by Mike to watch Harlow."

"He was hired by Mike to watch Sheila, though, wasn't he?" I'm the one who suggested that operator to Mike."

"He followed us out to the house when Sheila and I went to see Mike," I said. "He probably reported in there, and Mike changed the orders."

"Do you think so?" she said.

Something came to me, eluded me, and then came back. "Maybe Mike was so angry when he learned I was wise to the guy . . . Say, that's how Harlow learned about . . ." I shook my head.

"You're starting to think," she said. "That's a refreshing change." She pointed toward the living room. "Take a look out the window."

I went through the living room to the window and looked out. The Plymouth coupe was parked about a half-block down, on the other side of the street.

Helen Ames came up behind me. "He changes jobs fast, doesn't he? Is it you or me he's watching now?"

"If he knew I was here, he'd go to the police, wouldn't he?"

"No money in that. Is he in the car? I can't make it out."

"He's in the car," I said. "It must be me he's waiting for. I wonder what his angle is?"

"Why don't we find out?" she said.

"Get back in the closet for now, Eddie."

"Why?"

"I'll call him up and find out what's cooking."

I went back to the closet as she opened the window. I heard her call out, "What you hiding for, Kelly? Come on up and have some coffee?" Her voice sounded like a public-address system.

I heard her close the window, and then she came over to the closet door. "He's on his way. Don't sneeze now."

CHAPTER FOUR

Too Many Killers

I HEARD the downstairs buzzer after a while. I wondered if this hadn't been a bad move; I had no way of being sure about Helen Ames. There was still a possibility she was working with Harlow, and this animosity was just a front.

I heard the door open. Helen said, "Well, Kelly, you don't get much sleep, do you? I see by the papers you sold your soul again."

"Don't be so smart, Helen," a voice said. "You're no girl scout, yourself."

"I'm too old," she said. "I was, when I was a girl. What did Harlow pay you, Kelly?"

"I was working for Mike Cotton," he said, "and one client at a time is enough. I've got too good a standing down at Headquarters to pull anything fishy."

"They don't know you like I do," Helen said. "Sit down while I make some fresh coffee."

Then her voice came from the kitchen. "You weren't checking on me this morning, were you?"

"I just dropped in to see you."

"And sat in front for over an hour?"

"I had some reports to make out."

"In the car? You couldn't make them here? And why park so far down the block?"

There was a silence for seconds. Then his voice: "You're awful nosy this morning, aren't you?"

"No more than the law. Did you tell them about the Baxler deal, too, while you were talking to them, Kelly?"

Another silence, longer this time. "You like to needle a guy, don't you? That

Baxler biz was my one slip, and you're *one* of the *two* people who know about it. Did you ever think of that, Helen?"

"I've thought about it. It never worried me. Harlow wouldn't want anything to happen to me. You wouldn't want to be on the wrong side of Harlow, would you?"

"He doesn't scare me. And you don't. One thing you two forget— I got the law on my side."

There was no answer to that.

Kelly's voice again: "That Jackson guy sure pulled a fade-out. Not a trace of him since he got on the bus near that restaurant on Division."

"He's probably in Podunk, Ohio, by now," Helen said.

"No, he's in town. But it's a big town."

No answer from Helen.

Then Kelly's voice again. "You usually eat breakfast from two plates, Helen?"

"I had a guest for breakfast. Jealous, Kelly?" Her voice was tight.

There was a silence, one hell of a silence.

Then Kelly said, "I figured it right, at that, didn't I? Cotton came to you, and now Jackson."

"You're crazy," she said. "You're dumber than usual this morning, Kelly."

I heard his footsteps in the kitchen, and then they were quieter, muffled by the living-room carpeting. I saw the bed start to swing out, and I tensed.

Then Helen's voice. "Hold it, Kelly." The bed stopped moving.

Kelly's voice: "Harboring a wanted man. That makes the Baxler deal look tame. You stuck your neck out too far this time, Helen."

"I could kill a prowler," she said. "I could kill a crooked investigator who tried to stop me from going to the police with what I know about the Baxler deal. I could kill a man who tried to attack me. All these men could be you, Kelly, and you know it."

"That's a small gun," he said. "Ever shoot it, Helen? Do you know if it works or not?"

"I'll pull the trigger and find out," she said.

I could hear him breathe now. Two blocks away, I'd bet, they could hear him breathe. "Don't be a damned fool, Helen,"

he said. "Better think it over first."

"Sit in that chair," she said. "I'll give you two seconds to get to it. Move!"

I could hear him move. Then Helen's voice: "Come on out, Eddie."

I came out feeling like Little Boy Blue. All the work had been hers so far, hiding me, protecting me from Kelly, feeding me.

HE WAS a man about my height, I judged, but broader. He had a sallow, unhealthy-looking face and dark blue eyes. The gun in Helen's hand was pointing right at his nose.

I looked at her and said, "Thanks. And now what?"

"I'm not staging this production," she said, "but couldn't you work him over or something?"

"I wouldn't know how."

"Well, I certainly wouldn't. But in the movies, and on the radio, private detectives are always getting worked over. He probably expects it."

Kelly looked from Helen to me, and he didn't look as scared as he had when I first came out.

"Maybe," Helen said, "it would be better if I just shot him."

Now he was looking at her, and I saw his hand reaching inside his coat. He was leaning forward.

I made it in two steps, and my right hand smashed his mouth.

He slammed back into the chair, blood running down over his chin. I hit him again, this time flush on the nose.

I yanked his gun out of his pocket and backed away.

Blood from his nose joined the trickle from his mouth, and he sat there, looking scared again.

"He's supposed to make some wise crack," Helen said. "He's missed his cue."

She was white, and the gun faltered in her hand. She wasn't as tough as she tried to pretend. She was getting sick, I was sure.

Kelly said, "I never knew you to stick your neck out for anybody before, Helen. Don't let this guy's looks fool you."

She looked at me, and there was pleading in her eyes. She'd gone soft, and I wondered why. There was something besides pleading in her eyes, I thought.

"Eddie," she said, "I messed it all up,

didn't I? I was so smart, calling him up here and—"

"Relax, honey," I said. "I'm all right. We're both all right."

"You're both in the middle of a murder," Kelly said. "There isn't anything you can do about that."

The barrel of his gun was fairly long and heavy. It put an ugly welt along his cheek when I smacked him with it. He fell sideways in the chair, one hand covering the cheek. I gave him another slap with the barrel, over the knuckles this time.

He grunted, and Helen swayed. Her gun dropped to the floor.

"It's the first time for me, too, kid," I told her. "Pick up your gun and go out and finish the dishes."

She picked up the gun like a girl in a trance and headed for the kitchen. . . .

YOU NEED a strong stomach for this business. You need imagination and no morals, or maybe just the threat of the chair hanging over your head. It's surprising how much a stomach will take under those circumstances.

When I went out into the kitchen Kelly was unconscious in the living room.

Helen was smoking a cigarette and drinking a cup of black coffee. She looked at me, and then she looked away.

"I'm not proud of myself," I said.

She looked back at me. "I know it, Eddie. And I've been thinking. I've got a friend . . ."

She told me what she'd been thinking, and I took a wet, cold towel back into the living room with me, some time later.

When Kelly came to, he was mumbling to himself. I said, "I want you to phone Ames. Get him over here. I don't care how you do it or what you tell him. If you tip him off there's anything fishy about it, though, I'll really go to work on you."

His eyes were dull, but he understood me. He nodded and slumped back into the chair. It was five minutes before I could get him to the phone.

He said, "Things are breaking, Harlow. I'm over at Helen's. Can you get over here right away?"

A silence, and then Kelly said, "Check," and hung up. "He'll be right over."

I tied Kelly's hands and feet with some picture wire. We sat him in a big chair near the windows at the front of the room.

Helen stayed near the door, and I went into the kitchen.

It was seven minutes by the kitchen clock when Helen said, "He's coming now. He's walking."

I checked Kelly's gun and stood where I wouldn't be visible from the living room. Kelly hadn't told me anything, but I had a pretty good hunch as to how it had been engineered.

I heard the buzzer downstairs, and the door open a little later up here. I heard Helen say, "I haven't seen you for months, Harlow. Where have you been keeping yourself—besides jail?"

"Your humor, Helen, has always been vulgar, hasn't it?" he said. "What's happened to Mr. Kelly?"

"He tangled with a truck," Helen told him.

I heard the door close as they moved into the living room. Kelly moaned something.

I came out from the kitchen, Kelly's gun in my hand. I kept it pointed at Harlow Ames.

He was wearing a black suit and it made his face seem paler than ever. Some bright, circular disk was suspended from his watch chain across his vest. It reflected the morning sunlight.

He looked at me, at the gun. He said, "The police are looking for you, Eddie. It would be bad to be caught with a gun."

"It can't be any worse than it is," I said. "Sit down on the davenport there, Ames."

He sat down, his eyes on Kelly. He was frowning. A ray of sunlight caught the disk on his chest and made it sparkle. I kept my eyes away from that.

I said, "I was drugged at your apartment, Ames. I never would have been a stooge for you if you hadn't done that. I was taken to Cotton's along the back road, a road I didn't know. I remember the beer sign. You killed him and left me there."

He just shook his head.

"Take a look at Kelly," I said. "Take a good look and see yourself in about a half hour."

I didn't have to tell him. He couldn't

seem to take his eyes off Kelly's battered face.

"You'll never get away with it," he said.

"All I can do is try. Cover up that disk on your chest. Button your coat."

He smiled. "Does it bother you, Eddie?"

"It bothers me. It attracts the eye," I said. "It's too obvious for a smoothy like you, Ames. Cover it up."

He buttoned his coat. He looked again at Kelly. Kelly moaned and stirred in his chair.

"Maybe it would be better just to shoot you," I said. "With what Helen has on you we wouldn't burn for that. We'd probably get a reward."

HE LOOKED at Helen, and his eyes were on fire. "You told Mike about that, Helen, and you know what happened to him. You're playing a dangerous game, Helen."

"Take a look at the stakes," she said. "He's worth it."

"Oh . . ." he said. "So that's the way it is? Don't tell me, after all these years of faithfulness, you're—"

"Shut up," she said.

"All right," he said. "So I killed Cotton. And put Eddie there. You don't think it's anything I'm going to tell the police, do you? You can't do any more than kill me, and they'll do that." He was still looking at Kelly. "Couldn't we figure out something a little smarter?"

"I'm not smart enough," I said. "The police don't want a deal. They want a murderer."

"That's elementary, Eddie. But any murderer would do, wouldn't it?" And now he looked again at Kelly, and smiled.

"He's your alibi," he said.

"Is he? You don't think I do my own killing, do you? When I can hire a gun like Kelly? Which I did, but they don't need to know that. Kelly I can guarantee you, with enough evidence for any D.A."

Kelly moved forward in his chair and used a foul name.

"With Mike dead," Ames went on, "there's *two* million to divide up. Couldn't the four of us have a wonderful time on that? Shelia and Eddie, and you and I, dear. Wouldn't we have fun?"

Kelly used the name again. His mouth

was working, and the blood started to flow again from his cracked lips.

"You shouldn't talk, Kelly. You're always talking to the wrong people at the wrong time. You'll never make friends that way, Kelly."

The detective said, "I drove him out there, all right, but it was him that killed Cotton. I hit him once, but Ames finished him up. I came to Ames after Mike Cotton tied a can to me, and Ames cooked up the whole scheme."

"It makes sense," I said. "That's why Harlow knew Cotton had given me hell. That's how he knew I was on Mike's side. You told him, didn't you, Kelly?"

The detective nodded.

Harlow shook his head. "What a pack of fools you all are." He looked at me. "Two million to divide up, and you're trying to save the neck of a cheap private operative."

"It's personal," I said. "It's you I want to nail, Harlow."

"And have the two million to yourself?" He looked at Helen. "Why don't you be smart for the first time in your life? You don't think this card-playing Romeo is—"

"Shut up," I said. "Just admit you killed Mike Cotton."

"Why not?" he said. "What difference does it make?" He coughed. "You don't think I'd come here alone, do you?"

From the kitchen, Sarkis came into the living room. The gun in his hand was a big one, and it was trained on me.

"Don't move," he said.

I didn't move.

Ames said, "You should lock your kitchen door, Helen. You shouldn't forget that."

"And there's one thing you forgot, Harlow," she said. "You forgot just how many friends I have."

The man who came out of the closet was short and wide and ugly. He wore a grey suit and a Police Positive.

"You remember Sergeant Rasmussen of Homicide, don't you, Harlow?" Helen asked. "He's been inquiring about you so long I thought you two should meet." She shook her head. "An Abbott and Costello skit."

Sarkis made the mistake of swinging his gun toward the sergeant. Rasmussen put two slugs into Sarkis' belly before the swing was completed.

Sarkis went down, coughing blood.

IT WAS more than twenty-four hours before I got back to Helen's apartment. It was afternoon of the next day. The coffee was fresh, and we sat in the kitchen.

"He's nailed," I said. "Kelly talked and talked and talked. Sarkis is talking too. He should live another day. That crystal ball was a photo enlarger, huh? The negative was in the base."

She nodded. "That's right. Those—those vultures combed Europe after the war, getting all the group photographs, any kind of photographs of boys who were dead. They catalogued them, filed them, and any operator could buy them for any town he wanted."

"Sheila will come out of it, I think," I said. "I've been with her most of the morning."

"I expected that," she said. "You'll look even better with two million dollars."

(Continued on page 129)

HOW THE FOREMAN GOT HIS JOB

1

WE'LL BE NEEDING A NEW FOREMAN SOON, TOM-ANY IDEAS?

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2

THAT NIGHT

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3

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4

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5

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TEN PERCENT HERO!

By DAN GORDON



Joe's hands shot out like giant black snakes and caught each man by the neck.

IT WAS a mean and dirty guitar, and its voice came plaintively through the open door of a waterfront café. Herbie Carpis, Broadway agent, had heard perhaps a thousand guitars in his time and he was most eager to get away from this neighborhood. But the thrumming sound was strangely compelling, and it made him stop right there on the side-

It was enough to drive a man off Broadway, almost. Here was Mr. Zicker—the Mr. Zicker, of Acme Pictures—due in fifteen minutes, and those gorillas kept flashing their guns at poor Herbie Carpis, and all over a guitar. Guitars! Guns! Gorillas! What next?

walk. It led him inside the café door.

There was a little time when he couldn't see because of the smoke and the gloom, and then he saw the player, a huge and crouching figure, gigantic and ebony black. There were other people in the room, but Herbie didn't see them just then.

He moved to the bar, and the guitar's throbbing voice moved with him. There was another voice, too, the Negro's soft singing—singing that blended with the sound of the strings and chanted of night and the moon.

Herbie slid a thin dime onto the bar. The bartender eyed it distastefully. "Better not flash your roll like that, buddy. Whatdya want? Some peanuts?"

"Information," said Herbie. "Ten cents worth. This musician, he's working for you?"

"Naw. He's a seaman just got in from Trinidad. Playin' for fun, I guess."

"He plays good," Herbie announced with magnificent self-control. He left the bar and moved toward the ebony giant. The singer grinned widely and let the song die away, while his hands moved searchingly over the strings, making lazy, pleasant chords.

Herbie said abruptly, "Ever work in a club?"

"Never," the Negro said, and his accent was strangely British. "I came from the ship just a short time ago. For seven days I shall be here. And not to work, but to play."

"I mean playing," Herbie insisted. "Playing and singing, like now, only better. You'll get paid."

"I, Joe Whittington, have no need for money. Having saved my pay, now I sing."

Herbie didn't answer right away. He sat in a rickety chair, clasped his pudgy little hands over his very comfortable paunch, and listened while his brand-new client sang and played again. Herbie listened, and his mind went away from the shoddy café. His mind went wandering uptown, visualizing, with the aid of the music, this man before a dazzling white curtain. Maybe Roxy's had one. If not, they could have one made. And the lighting—blue and purple, fixed so it went from dark to light and back again, like in the old Ted Lewis shows. Mood

stuff. It would make the customers sad and mournful. And . . .

JOE WHITTINGTON stopped playing. Herbie glanced around the room. A telephone which had lived through some mighty brawls still clung to the greasy wall, and Herbie got up and waddled to it. On the way, he noticed the two men who might well be twins, so alike were their sin-scarred faces. They were giving the singer their undivided attention, and they didn't even glance at Herbie, though he passed quite close to their table.

He took this as the ultimate tribute to Joe Whittington's magic. A performer who could make these wharf rats hold still would have no trouble at all with the gentler patrons who got drunk in the uptown clubs.

"Waldorf?" Herbie said. "You got a Mr. Zicker, in town for Acme Pictures. I want him on the phone."

A voice said, "Mr. Zicker's secretary." "Jack Telig!" Herbie said cautiously. "Since when've you been a secretary?"

"Oh, it's been a year, at least, since I became hungry enough to give up acting. What do you want with Zicker?"

"A find," Herbie said with soft reverence. "I got the find of the year. It'll take me some time to build him up, but I want Zicker should hear him once, before he goes back to Hollywood. Then, when we talk terms in maybe six months, he should know who I'm talking about."

"Well . . ." The secretary's tone was doubtful. "It would have to be awfully good, Herb. The old man didn't come on business. He's in town for only two days, having his ulcers repaired."

"He'll feel better right away, as soon as he hears my client. One okay from you, Jack, and we come up." Herbie paused and considered the mileage, then snapped his fingers in front of the mouthpiece and added recklessly, "We'll take a cab!"

"No . . . I wouldn't do that," Telig said. "Perhaps . . . I'll tell you. Have everything ready to go in your office. I'll run Zicker through there by telling him it's an appointment he simply must keep. But Herb, it had better be good. And the most important thing: Any kind of confusion upsets the old man, plays hell with his ulcers. He's got to have absolute

quiet. Everything must be orderly."

"Like a churchyard," promised Herbie. "That's the way my office is. You'll see for yourself when you get there. You can hear me dropping pins."

"Right," Jack Telig said. "See you at three then, Herb."

"Thanks, Jack. And I want you to know—"

"Forget it, Herb. Out of all the agents I had, you were the only one who was truthful enough to tell me I couldn't act. If I'd believed you in the beginning, I'd have saved myself some time. So long."

Herbie heard the click and hung up. He went happily back to his prospective star, buoyed by the thought that at least one ex-client did not think of him as a jerk. And the fact that said friendly ex now had the ear of a fabulous producer did nothing to diminish Herbie's glow.

Joe Whittington accentuated the down-beat to acknowledge Herbie's return. Herbie waited till the end of the number before he said, "Come on, Joe. Let's go."

"It is early," Joe Whittington said. "I think I shall stay for a time."

"We can't. The girl who types up the contracts wants she should get off early. Better we get started now."

Resignedly, Joe Whittington got up and stretched his mighty arms. The guitar, though it was of standard size, dangled from one huge fist and seemed too small, a toy. Joe said, "Very well, my friend. Lead on, since you know the way."

Herbie glanced up at the tolerant grin, and it came to him that all this talk of contracts and clubs was lost on Joe Whittington. The big boy wouldn't know what a valuable commodity talent could become in the hands of a capable agent.

They were passing the table where the two men sat, when one of them stood up and said, "Hey, fellah. You want to sell that guitar?"

Joe Whittington shook his head, and Herbie Carpis said, "No."

The other man also arose, and now the two of them stood, somewhat apart. "Make you a good price," one said.

"Fifty," said the other.

"Not for sale," Herbie said. "Please. We're in a hurry."

"One moment," said Joe Whittington. "Surely for fifty dollars I could buy an-

other guitar. Perhaps a cheaper one." He held the instrument out for inspection. "Of late I have not been fond of it. It seems heavier than it once did, and even its voice has changed."

"Not now," Herbie pleaded. "Later, you can come back. With a three o'clock appointment with Mr. Adolph Zicker, we should be out shopping like mad for a guitar?"

"A hundred," the first man said.

"Or would you rather," the other said softly, "we took it away from you?"

Joe Whittington's brows drew down, and his voice rumbled deep in his throat. "I do not think," he said, "I care to do business with you. Now if you will step aside . . ."

"Cop outside," Herbie said, and watched the eyes of the two men flick sideways, verifying his statement. He felt an unusual affection for the blue-coated figure as the men stepped out of the way. He smiled and said, "Hello, Officer," to the puzzled cop as he piloted Joe through the door.

"Subway," Herbie said. "Only three-four blocks away."

"There will be drink?" Joe Whittington asked. "Drink, and perhaps some girls?"

"Everything," Herbie answered. "On Broadway there's booze so much you could swim in it, and girls like nowhere else."

Joe Whittington grinned and strolled beside Herbie, strumming and humming softly. Though the giant was merely loafing along, he was covering the ground, and Herbie ran beside him, with little pattering steps.

THEY were passing a vacant lot, and the block was a lonely one. A row of billboards faced the street. At the far end of the open ground a small boy was hurling stones at a heap of rusty cans. He flung the pebbles without enthusiasm. His back was toward Herbie and Joe.

The car with the muddy license plates approached them from the rear. It made a U-turn in the middle of the block, settled screechingly beside the curb and disgorged the same two men who had tried to buy the guitar.

"Trouble," Herbie said.

The foremost man, hearing him, said, "You said it, Fatty. Hand over that music box."

"My friend," Joe Whittington said, "why do you not go elsewhere? Have I not made it plain that I do not wish to sell the guitar?"

"You don't have to. We ain't buyin'. We're takin' up a collection. Hand it over, big boy."

Joe Whittington sighed and shook his head. Slowly he turned and placed the guitar in Herbie's reluctant hands. Then swiftly, he turned to face the two men. He said, "You fellows had better go."

One man made a lunge for Herbie. The other tackled Joe. Herbie back-pedaled rapidly, still clutching the heavy guitar. Not that he wanted it. He would, at that moment, have cheerfully surrendered the instrument to the men. His hands were outstretched, offering it, when the man before him abruptly halted, then seemed to float backward through the air.

The man's feet were off the ground, and it was a moment before Herbie realized that there was nothing miraculous

about this flight through space. One of Joe Whittington's hands was encircling the man's skinny throat. With the other hand Joe was alternately holding and shaking the other hood. He brought the two together before him and shook them both in rhythm to the clacking of their teeth.

Herbie, seeing one man's desperate fumbling, said sharply, "Hey! He's getting a gun!"

With a grunt, Joe Whittington flung the two away from him. They landed in a sprawling heap, and the man with the gun came up first. But his companion caught his arm, saying in a strange and choked-up voice, "No gun, Ben. Remember. . ."

The man with the gun lowered his arm indecisively, then both men got in the car. Herbie noted the make and the year, but the plates were completely covered with mud. The police would have trouble picking that one sedan from the thousands in New York. And already they had wasted much time. When the sedan turned the distant corner, Herbie shrug-

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ged impatiently, and urged his client on.

As they came to the subway entrance, Herbie laid a restraining hand on Joe's arm. With his mild brown eyes he carefully scanned the street without sighting either of the two men. He thought he saw one of them a moment later on the crowded subway platform, but when the train arrived, the crowd boiled forward and blocked his view.

The same crowd gave him a feeling of safety as familiar stations flashed past the windows and he knew he was nearing his office.

Joe Whittington took the subway in stride, balancing himself against the sway with the ease of a born commuter. He seemed delighted with the speed. "Cars go like hell," he said.

Herbie said, "Ours," as they came to Forty-second Street and propelled the good-natured giant before him through the sliding doors.

Up on the street Joe lingered longingly in front of a poster describing a vaudeville show, but Herbie tugged at him gently and eventually landed Joe safely on the large divan in his office. As Herbie puffed across the room to squeeze his bulk into the swivel chair behind his desk, he sounded somewhat like a busy tug resting after the effort of bringing a liner in from sea.

The two men came in and caught Herbie in the middle of the sigh. They brought with them the girl who usually answered the phone in Herbie's outer office.

"I tried to tell them, Mr. Carpis . . ." The girl was almost crying.

"Never mind," said Herbie. He felt better able to handle things here behind his desk. He said in a businesslike voice, "Sorry, boys. I've got an important engagement—big man coming any minute. You mind coming back pretty soon?"

"Yeah, we'd mind," the man Herbie had heard called Ben said. He drew his gun softly from inside his coat, balanced it in his hand. "We had orders," he went on, "not to do no shooting. But after we followed you up on the subway we phoned the home office and get them orders changed."

Herbie said, "You mean you shoot everybody who won't sell you guitars?"

"That's right," Ben said pleasantly. "Sometimes two and three a day. How

about it, Hoppy? Everything clear?" "Get on with it," Hoppy said.

Herbie and Joe and the girl watched the little gunman as he crossed the room at a lazy pace and picked up Joe's guitar. Placing the instrument on the floor, he deliberately raised his foot and drove his heel through the fragile wood.

JOE WHITTINGTON rumbled something incoherent. Hoppy moved forward and picked up a shining metal tin, a round, flat can that had been glued inside the guitar. Slivers of wood still clung to the metal, and Hoppy broke them off carefully before he shoved the tin inside his coat.

"Imagine," Hoppy said. "The big chump carries his junk all over the ocean without ever knowing he has it."

"Junk?" said Herbie Capris.

"Dope," said the one called Ben. "Worth about fifty G's—more if it's handled right." Now that he had what he wanted, his manner was almost pleasant.

Herbie noted that, and he glanced at the clock on his desk. In fifteen minutes, Mr. Zicker of Acme Pictures would be coming in that door, Mr. Zicker, who liked things quiet. And that was all right. These men would be gone by then, and the girl could get another guitar from the music store down the street. . . .

Looking at Joe Whittington, Herbie saw the giant regarding the wrecked guitar. On his face there was sorrow and shocked surprise, a kind of childish disbelief. The phone girl was crouched against the wall as if trying to make herself small.

Herbie knew it was none of his business. Such things should be for the police. He should let these men go on—they were going now, anyway, moving toward the door. Plenty of time to make things quiet before Mr. Zicker came. His gaze fell upon the rose in the vase on his desk, the rose his married daughter, Sarah, furnished every morning. He thought of the other children, growing up in the city.

Regretfully he raised the vase and hurled it at Hoppy's head.

Immediately a bullet from Ben's gun came singing by his ear. Herbie turned white and ducked behind his desk. He remained there, a quivering ball of flesh,

(Continued on page 126)

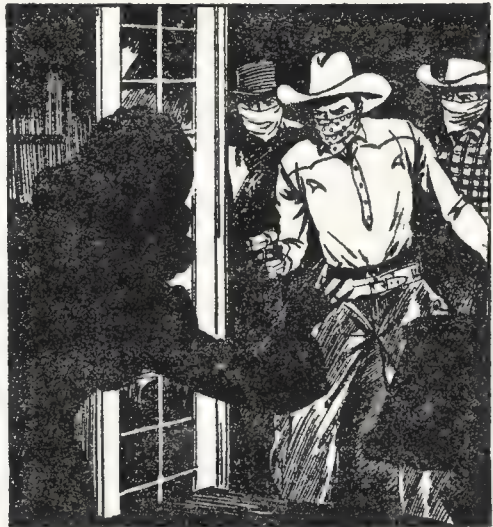
DETECTIVE TALES

ON THE SPOT

For Next Month



There isn't much Dave Smith, Hollywood actor's agent, can do. Gold-digging Bonnie Wilson has his client, screen star Malcolm Storme, in a blackmail squeeze, and Dave knows that the time has come to pay off. . . .



But the payoff scene doesn't turn out quite the way Dave had expected. For instead of Bonnie getting the hundred G's, three dude-dressed muggs interrupt and carry off not only the dough—but the lady as well!



After the excitement has died down and Dave has gone home to sleep, comes another interruption, by a couple of hard-looking gents flashing detective shields. "Come along," they order Dave. What else can he do?



But the "cops" turn out to be phonies. And it seems they want Dave for a little chore: Bonnie, it appears, is now dead, and Dave has been elected a one-man burial detail—for a two-person-sized grave!

The conclusion of this story will be told in Donn Mullally's dramatic murder novel, "Watch the Corpses Go By!" . . . featured in the August issue of DETECTIVE TALES. Out June 24th.

*Thrilling
Mystery Novelette*

SWING- TIME SUCKER

By **JOHN D.
MacDONALD**



Brad Whelan didn't like it. For it had been his girl that had been killed, his car that had the blood on it, his alibi that had folded under police scrutiny. . . . And, with every blow his pain-wracked body absorbed, he knew it was going to be —his funeral!

All of the humiliation of the past few days exploded into cold rage as Brad sank his left hand up to the wrist in Crandall's middle.



CHAPTER ONE

Beat That Murder Rap!

BRAD WHELAN frowned in half sleep, the sunlight beating through his eyelids in a red glow. He rolled onto the other side, away from the glare, began to drift off again.

"Brad!" the voice said.

Brad frowned and opened one eye. As he did so the thick hangover thud began

to pulsate somewhere behind his eyebrows.

"Wake up, boy!" the voice said. Brad sat up slowly, resting his forehead on his raised knees, feeling the thick coil of nausea. Beyond his preoccupation with his symptoms was a faint puzzlement as to how Gus Rike had managed to get into his

apartment, and why Gus was being so familiar.

In all previous dealings it had been "Mr. Whelan."

But Gus Rike was slouched in a chair that had been turned to face the bed. He was a vast, shambling man with a face like a mouldy rock. He wore the usual baggy grey suit and sat with his legs straight out, his head against the back of the chair, thick fingers laced across a hard belly.

"What is it? How'd you get in?" Brad asked sleepily.

"Rough night, Brad? A little drunk, maybe?"

Brad pulled himself together. "Friend, leave us skip my condition. What do you want?"

"Just dropped around to chat, Brad. Just a matey little chat."

"Hell of a time for it."

"Is it? I think it's a fine time. If I hadn't been so busy, I would have had my lunch an hour ago."

"What do you want, Rike?"

"You never should have switched from Scotch to that dark rum, friend."

The ghosts of the evening began to drift through Brad's mind. Walter's Spot on Route 68. The rum had been syrupy and he had drunk it straight.

"Did I see you last night, Rike?"

"Uh-uh. I've been talking to a couple bartenders. They say you had a beaut."

Brad swung his legs over the side of the bed, grabbed his robe and fumbled into it as he headed for the bathroom. He said, "Gus, go away, will you? I can't talk shop at this time. I'll phone you."

"We'll talk now," Gus Rike said with an odd smile.

Brad spun around. "Damn you, Rike! Either get out of here or I'll call the chief."

Gus sighed. "My, how you play innocent! Big traffic expert annoyed by poor little Detective-Lieutenant Rike of Homicide. Go ahead. Call him, killer."

BRAD walked three steps back into the room and studied Rike's expression. "Is this some sort of a joke, Rike?"

Gus' yawn was frank. "Why do they all say that? Get your clothes on, killer. I got a car waiting."

"This is some silly mistake," Brad said

weakly. "Killer? Whom did I kill?"

"Hell, don't you even remember that? You killed Anna Nash."

Brad sagged suddenly against the door frame. "Anna! Dead!"

Rike clapped his big hands, his face contemptuous. "Bravo, Brad. RKO needs you."

Somehow he got back to the bed, sat down.

Rike said easily, "I shouldn't talk to you, Whelan, until we get to Headquarters, where there's a man with a stenotype to take it down. But we got you so cold it doesn't matter. You left Walter's Spot at one in morning with Anna Nash. When you went out the door you were arguing about who was going to drive. Twice during the evening she cuffed you across the mouth. You went out and got in that big, shiny car of yours and turned away from town. You parked with her on Lookout Hill at the necking ground. We got your tire marks. She walked from the parked car out to the highway toward town. You swung around and drove after her. We found her body in the ditch. A guy driving through noticed her there at four this morning. We've been working ever since. And now the case is closed."

Brad frowned. He remembered the angry words at Walter's, the drive out, the angry words in the car. Yes, she had left, slamming the door contemptuously. He vaguely remembered her saying, "We'll break it off right here, Brad. We're no good for each other. And you're too drunk to ride with. I'll get back to town okay."

"Somebody else hit her," Brad said dully.

"Sure, Whelan. Somebody else. You drove back to town and put your car in the garage around the corner. The attendant didn't notice the front end of it. Broken headlight, Anna's blood on the grill guard, and some blond hair that matches hers. He does remember that you were drunk. Everything checks, pal. Tire marks, blood type, hair analysis. Every last little thing. You brought your car in and nobody else took it out. Brother, I never see anybody cooked so good. Right now the lab has some glass off the road that they're matching with the headlight that you smashed when you hit her."

Like a wooden man, cleverly jointed to

move like a human, Brad went into the bathroom. As he started to close the door, Rike called, "Don't try anything, Whelan. There's a man posted in the alley."

Brad leaned cold hands against the porcelain sink and stared at himself in the mirror. His skin had a puffy greyness and his dark eyes were sunken into his head, shadowed and ill. The world had become oddly unreal. He had read and heard of situations such as this. But always it had been something destined to happen to the other fellow. The other fellow always got himself involved in cheap and sordid situations, open and shut cases of murder. Not Brad Whelan.

A world without Anna Nash was a lonely place. He knew that he would carry with him a constant regret about their last evening. A foul, impossible evening. Maybe, as she died, she remembered previous evenings when things had been right between them.

Blond hair framing an impudent, gamin face, falling to straight shoulders. Trim young body, but hurt and disappointment in the blue eyes.

It had been the same old quarrel. He had hated loose ends. She had been separated from her husband for over three years. She had married too young, and unwisely.

The quarrel had been in the same old pattern.

"Divorce him, Anna. What good are you doing him, supporting him, keeping him in liquor money and women?"

"I was bad for him, Brad. I had too much money. I spoiled him. And I hurt him. John Crandall might have become something without me. He's getting on his feet now. He's working again. When he can stand on his own feet, then I'll divorce him. Then he'll be able to stand the shock to his pride."

"Don't be such a fool, Anna. How long will this 'job' of his last? Hell, as long as you keep sending him a check every month, why should he strain himself? He probably got the job just to keep you on the hook a little longer."

"Please, Brad."

"Please what? Please stop talking? Please go away? Please let me play mother bountiful without interruption? Anna, darling, why throw your life away on a man like that?"

That was when she always grew angry. "What is throwing your life away? Grabbing every pleasure you can? Or is it doing what you know you have to do. I managed to turn John Crandall into a bum. Now I'll stick around and back him up until he's a man again."

"Can't you set up a trust fund and have him get the income and then divorce him?"

"It wouldn't be the same. He's got to feel that I'm pulling for him, that I'm taking an interest."

The last quarrel had been different from all the others. He knew that he had made a foolish move. He had said, "Okay, Anna. If you're so generous about your

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drinking friends, here's where I get drunk. Maybe it will do me some good with you."

And his drinking had left him with a hangover and a world in which there was no Anna Nash. Anna Nash Crandall, to be strictly accurate.

He dashed cold water into his face, but it did nothing to wake him up to reality. In his mind's eye he could feel the thud of the car striking her, and he could no longer tell if it was some ghost of alcoholic memory or purely imagination.

Had he killed Anna? The facts said that he had. Yet, if he had been sober enough to drive back to Westport without mishap why hadn't the shock of hitting her sobered him up. Or had he hit her without noticing her? That didn't seem reasonable.

He shaved and dressed. Rike sat in the same position, whistling softly.

"Let's go," Brad said sharply. Through habit he turned toward the bureau to pick up his car keys. They weren't there.

Rike said, "Your keys are in my pocket, Whelan. We'll check them for prints. Too bad you park your own car inside that garage. It might have given you an out."

"Where's my car?"

"Still in the garage. We took pictures and samples. You won't need it for a long time, pal."

Clouds had covered the sun and a fitful wind swirled autumn leaves and scraps of paper down the quiet street. The man behind the wheel of the prowler car opened the rear door. Brad climbed in, Rike following him. Two other men appeared and got in. The car started slowly and somberly down toward the Westport Police Headquarters.

THE LATE AFTERNOON papers carried three pictures on the first page of the second section. Only a new Berlin crisis kept Brad Whelan off page one.

Brad's picture was in the middle of the three. It was the same picture that had been run when civic organizations of Westport, alarmed by the rising accident rate, had brought him to Westport a year before to make recommendations and see that he had the authority through the Common Council to put them into effect. Brad reported both to the Commissioner of

Public Safety and the Civic Planning Commission.

The newspaper picture was a smiling picture. On the left of his picture was a studio photograph of Anna Nash in bridal veil, the picture that had been run at the time of her marriage to John Crandall.

To the right was another picture of Anna. Only it was not recognizable. It was a flash picture of a body in a ditch, skirt hiked up to display white legs at a limp, dead angle. The photograph had been retouched to make a blurred smear of the dead face.

TRAFFIC EXPERT HELD FOR HIT-RUN

B. G. Whelan was picked up by local police late this afternoon on suspicion of murder of Mrs. John Crandall, whose body was found by a passing motorist at four this morning in a ditch near Lookout Hill. Numerous witnesses saw Whelan and Mrs. Crandall together earlier in the evening, and laboratory tests have shown that it was Whelan's car which struck Mrs. Crandall. Whelan's car was found in a public garage near his apartment, no attempt having been made to remove the evidence of the alleged murder. As yet Whelan's statement has not been made public.

Mrs. Crandall was born in Westport and attended private schools in this area. She was the daughter of Leonard Nash, owner of the Nash Foundries, who died a year before his daughter's marriage to John Crandall, leaving her the bulk of his estate. . . .

Brad was unable to read further as Chief Morgansen took the paper away, rolled it tightly and began to whack it gently against the corner of his desk.

He turned to Brad. "That isn't much of a statement, Whelan."

Brad was hoarse from the hours of questioning. "It's the only statement I can make."

"You mean the only statement you want to make. I wish to call your attention, Whelan, to certain discrepancies in your various statements."

"I've told Rike and I'll tell you—I was drunk. Any discrepancies are because I have been remembering more and more of the evening. I tell you that she got out of the car. I watched her and I heard her heels on the pavement. The sound faded away. I sat and had a cigarette. Then I turned around and came back to town. As far as I know, I didn't hit anybody. I took

it slow and easy, because I felt bad about mixing driving and drinking. It's the first time in my life I've ever mixed the two. Anna drove to the parking spot, and she was going to drive back to town. But I made her mad. So she walked out on me."

The bulky man from the District Attorney's Office sighed and said, "Unless you get more to go on, we can't make the charges murder in the first degree."

Chief Morgansen glared at the man. "You pick a fine place to tell me that."

The man shrugged. "You can hold him forty-eight hours. It's nearly midnight. You've had him for eleven hours. Keep talking to him."

It gave Brad a queer feeling to be discussed as though he were not present. Rike said, "It would be enough for me. Motive, established at the scene, weapon. And nobody else could have used the weapon."

"Oh, he did it all right," the man from the D.A.'s office said. "The trick is how we can show that it was intentional. Charge him with first degree and, as it stands, he gets an acquittal. Charge him with manslaughter and we can probably stick him for a few years in the can, anyway."

"I've told you all there is to tell," Brad said.

"Take him down again, Rike," the Chief said. "Give him to Barret for a while."

CHAPTER TWO

Homicide Heir

HE CAME TO and rolled onto his hands and knees. A strong arm around his middle picked him up, slung him back into the wide oak chair. The room wavered crazily. Barret, a florid, sweating man with butcher's arms, squeegeed sweat off his low forehead with a thick finger and said pleadingly, "Come on, pal. Come on! It's nearly dawn."

Each word was forced through a thickened throat as dry as sand. "I...told...you...everything."

Barret shrugged and thudded the heel of his hand, not hard, against Brad's forehead. To Brad it was as though his head

were full of crushed glass. The light blow sent jangling pain through every inch of him.

"Give, pal. Give!" Barret said. "You're working me too hard."

At that moment the door was flung open. Rike came in, quick concern on his face. He ran to Brad, turning to Barret and saying, "What the hell have you been doing to him? Have you been slugging him, you stupid flatfoot?"

"Hell, I ain't marked him," Barret said sullenly.

"I'm sorry about this, Brad," Rike said softly. He helped Brad to his feet, walked with him over to the door. Supporting Brad, he turned and said to Barret, "You'll hear about this, muscle man."

They went down a long corridor to Rike's office. He clicked on the light, helped Brad into a chair. He went out and came back with a tall glass of ice water. Brad gulped it eagerly, his teeth chattering against the rim of the glass. He gratefully took the offered cigarette, sucked the smoke deep into his lungs.

"Sorry about that clown Barret," Rike said.

"It's okay."

Rike leaned forward, his eyes intent. "Brad, I'm your friend. Let me give you some advice. That dame was probably asking for it. You give us the whole story and I'll do the best I can for you. Honest. If I have the whole story I can help you better."

Brad Whelan frowned. "Whole story? Gus, I've told everything there is to tell. Believe me, I appreciate your offer but you see..."

Brad lay where he fell, the hot blood salty between his teeth, the overturned chair beside him. Rike stood beside the desk, hands on hips. In almost a whisper he said, "If there's anything I hate it's a wise murderer. A smart guy! An angle boy!"

* * *

Charges of manslaughter were preferred. The coroner's jury returned a verdict of accidental death. Brad, freed on five thousand dollars bail, walked out into the cool fall sunshine on Saturday afternoon. The newspapers had heard. A photographer waited at the foot of the steps to snap his picture.

Brad Whelan knew what would happen. A few weeks of freedom before his case came up. Then the courtroom, the evidence, the verdict, and a few years spent as a number rather than as a man. The fight had gone out of him. He wanted to find some deep dark hole and crawl into it.

Anna's funeral had been held Saturday morning.

He walked down the street. From an open window came the brassy blare of a baseball game. Couples walked arm in arm. The air was warm, mild. He decided to go back to his apartment, take a hot shower and sleep for days. Maybe in sleep the whole thing would be forgotten for a little while. At Headquarters they had shown him the picture of Anna before it had been retouched for publication. Whenever he shut his eyes, he saw her dead face.

Three blocks from the station, Anna Nash, dressed in black, stepped out in front of him and struck him in the mouth with all her strength. He staggered back, his eyes watering from the sharp pain, his mind reeling with the shock. It was all some stupid game, some absurd plot. Anna was alive!

As she tried to strike him again, he caught her warm wrists, said brokenly, "Anna! Darling! They—told me you were dead!"

She fought against him, gasping, "I'm not Anna, you killer! You..."

He didn't let her go. He saw then that it was a younger Anna he held. The hair was a paler shade of blond, the face younger and fresher. The pain in these blue eyes was a new pain, not the ancient grief of Anna's. This body was slim with a colt-like grace.

"You're Nora," he said.

She stopped fighting. He released her wrists. "I'm Nora," she said coldly. "I came back from school for the funeral."

"But from what Anna said, I thought you were about twelve."

"I'm eighteen, Mr. Whelan. Tell me, what does it feel like to kill a woman?"

He shook his head slowly. "I don't know," he said humbly. "I would rather have killed myself."

Her face softened surprisingly, her eyes widening. "Why... you mean that, don't you?"

He pushed by her, not looking back. In a few minutes he heard the quick tap of her heels. It reminded him of the sound of other heels on a night road. He shuddered. She caught his arm. "I'm sorry, Mr. Whelan."

A taxi was cruising down the street. He hailed it, waited at the curb. He stepped in, tried to pull the door shut, but she came in beside him.

"What do you want, Miss Nash?" he asked.

"I want to talk to you. I want to know what Anna felt and thought the last few hours of her life. I want to know about that. There's no one here I can talk to but you." There was no mirth in her laugh. "I never thought I would want to talk to you. But it looks as if we're the only two people here that—that loved her."

"And suppose I don't want to talk to you, Miss Nash?"

"You'll talk. Where are we going? Your place?"

THE ROOM was stale with smoke. Nora sat on his couch, her legs under her. He had paced back and forth, answering her questions, telling all he could remember of the evening.

"That's it," he said.

The windows were pale grey with twilight. He sat opposite her, weary in mind and body. The cigarettes had made his throat raw. The smoke in the room stung his eyes.

Nora was pale and quiet. Each time he looked at her, she was so like Anna that it pinched his heart.

"Was she going to change her mind? About Crandall?" Nora asked.

"No. She said he needed her in the background. Was Crandall at the . . . funeral?"

Her lip curled. "In all his glory. One hundred proof tears rolled down his stalwart cheeks and he sobbed loud enough to be heard way down at the road."

"Do you think he'll miss her, that he needed her?"

"John Crandall doesn't need anyone in this world but John Crandall and a bottle and a blonde. Of course, a few dollars will help. He's got them now."

"In the will?"

"Right. I get a trust fund that will give me about fifty a week for life. John gets the rest. Without strings. Maybe my sister thought a big responsibility like that would straighten him out. You ought to have seen him at the reading of the will. He knew what was coming, all right. He had a rough time looking bereaved."

"Why did she marry him?"

"A few years ago John was a husky guy with all the charm of an airdale puppy. The women wanted to mother him and protect him. He's softened up a lot since then."

He said, "Anna was trying to make him strong. She'd started to cut his check a little each month."

Nora sat up. "Did she tell you that?"

"Of course. How would I have heard?"

Nora leaned back, her smooth forehead suddenly knotted. "Now that's a funny thing. He told me yesterday that Anna had been increasing her allowance to him. Somebody lies."

"Crandall would be my candidate."

"Mine too. That ought to be easy to check. I'm staying at Anna's apartment. I've got to dispose of her things. Her check book is there. We could go look at it."

"What difference does it make?"

"Maybe none. But things like that bother me. I like to know the answers. What was John trying to prove? Come with me?"

"I'd rather not go there, Nora."

She looked at him steadily. "What are you afraid of?"

* * *

He stood in the doorway to Anna's apartment while Nora found the light

switch. The familiar room flashed into sudden clarity. The big couch was made up as a bed.

"I didn't want to sleep in her bed," Nora said quickly.

He walked in, thinking that any moment he would hear Anna's cheery call. "Brad, darling? Sit tight. Martinis coming up."

He sat down suddenly, his face in his hands, his heart empty. Nora touched his shoulder gently. "Sorry, guy. I shouldn't have insisted."

He shrugged off the depression, gave her a crooked smile. "I'm okay now."

She came back with the check book. And the file of stubs. John Crandall, who last year, had been getting two hundred and fifty a month, had been gradually cut down, ten dollars a time, until he was receiving a hundred and seventy.

Nora frowned again. "You know, Brad, the only reason why he should lie is to prove to me that he was content and had no reason to kill her. That's stupid, because he couldn't have killed her. Your car killed her. They proved that."

"You don't have to keep telling me, Nora."

"Don't get sensitive, Brad. Let me think out loud. No, that's the only reason I can think of. And it doesn't make sense."

"Why don't you ask Crandall?"

She stood up. "I think I will. It's seven now. He ought to be well started on his evening drunk by this time."

NORA talked her way by the desk clerk at the cheap hotel. His eyes had widened in obvious recognition of Brad.

Nora tapped on the door, opened it and

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walked in. John Crandall was squatting on the floor, catalogues spread out around him. Boat catalogues.

He was like an athlete who had been sprayed with warm butter. It had made premature jowls under his square chin, gathered in folds at his waist, made unhealthy pouches under his eyes. He was big, and he still moved with quick strength, looked every man in the eye and talked loudly and boldly.

"What the hell do you think you're . . ." He stopped as he recognized Brad. He came off the floor in a quick movement, his lips drawn back from his teeth, his bunched right fist drawn back.

As Brad saw the blow start, he moved inside it. The inside of Crandall's forearm struck the side of Brad's throat with numbing force. All of the humiliation of the past few days exploded into cold rage. Brad sank his left hand up to the wrist in Crandall's middle, and as the big man bent suddenly, he smashed him squarely between the eyes with a short straight right.

John Crandall bounced off the spread catalogues with a thud that shook the walls. He started to get up, saw Brad start for him, and stayed where he was.

"I'm turning you in for assault," Crandall said.

"With me swearing I saw you hit first? Don't be an ass, John!" Nora snapped.

"What do you want?" Crandall asked sullenly.

"What are you going to do? Buy a boat? Why aren't you drunk, as usual?"

"I might buy a boat."

"Get up and sit over there," Brad ordered.

Crandall obeyed humbly. There was little expression on his face. "I've turned over a new leaf, Nora. I'm not drinking any more."

"The great shock, I suppose," Nora said acidly.

"Yes. That's it. It brought me to my senses."

Nora looked with distaste at the crumpled bed, at the line of cigarette butts mashed against the varnished floor half under the bed.

"How could anybody with this kind of a layout be shocked at anything?" she asked.

Crandall's eyes were puffing, but he was

regaining his poise. "Murderers shouldn't be let out on bail," he said softly.

Brad took two quick steps toward him. "Stop it!" Nora said sharply. "What good will that do?"

She scuffed at the catalogues with the side of her shoe. "Going to buy a nice big boat, John?"

"I might," he said.

"Going a long distance?"

"I may take a trip as soon as I get the boat."

She put her hands on her hips, elbows swinging out in a faintly shrewish way, her head to one side. Her voice was a lash dipped in salt. "Come on, Johnny, you masterful brute. Tell Nora. Tell her why you're like a little boy with his pocket full of candy canes. Swiped something, Johnny? Done something you shouldn't? My! My! No drinking? Fleeing on a boat? What cooks, Johnny?"

He drew himself up. "I've always wanted to take a boat trip."

"How much did Anna hand out to you each month, John?" she snapped.

He looked suspiciously from Nora to Brad. "It varied," he said sullenly.

"Her check book said it was varying like mad. Her check book said that it looked as though it might disappear entirely. How about that, Mr. Crandall?"

He shrugged. "So what? It doesn't matter now, does it?"

"Why did you tell me that she'd increased the handouts?"

John Crandall was completely under control. He smiled. "Dear, I didn't want you to know that your sister was small about money."

This time Nora had to grab Brad's arm. John Crandall said, "Let him hit me, dear. It'll make him feel good. It's a form of self-expression, you know, hitting people with his fists and with his car."

Nora walked to the door. "Come on, Brad."

He followed her sullenly. John Crandall called after them, "You ought to pick your friends a little more carefully, Nora."

Brad slammed the door.

They were silent on the way down in the elevator. Out on the street she said, "He did something, Brad. God knows how he did it. But he did it."

"You mean he killed Anna? Is that

what you're trying to say? Or is it just something that you'd like to believe?"

She turned and faced him. "Do you think you killed her, Brad?"

He said helplessly, "Nora, I don't know. That's just it. I don't know!"

CHAPTER THREE

Dark Rendezvous

TWENTY-FOUR HOURS later they were in Brad's apartment. He had a stubble of beard. Coffee cups were on the table in front of the couch. The room was hazy blue with smoke. He scowled at Nora. She paced back and forth. She seemed to have lost weight, to have become more taut. Her eyes were enormous.

She turned on him. "Think, man! Think! Dig down in that subconscious mind of yours and dredge up something that can help us. And don't go to sleep again or I'll douse you with cold water again."

"You're worse than Rike," he mumbled. "Lead me back to a cell. There isn't any more to dredge up. Not a damn thing."

She acted as though the spring that had kept her taut had suddenly unwound. She wavered to a chair and sat down, her eyes closed, her cheeks hollow, her head bent. What remained of her lipstick was like tiny flecks of blood against pale lips. Her hair was rumpled, her dress wrinkled.

He went over to her and touched her hair. "Are we licked because there's nothing to remember, Nora?"

She nodded. "I guess that's it, Brad." Her voice held infinite weariness. "We'd best call it a day."

"You need some sleep, Nora."

She gave him a crooked smile. "If I can sleep, Brad."

"Just lie down and the lights'll go out on you, Nora," he said. Suddenly he tilted his head on one side, as though listening. "That's funny."

"What is it, Brad?" she said, jumping up. "What is it?" She took his shoulders and tried to shake him.

He gave her a shame-faced grin. "Nothing at all. Something about the evening, but it doesn't fit. I just remembered that when we went up the hill from Walter's Spot, my damn lights were pretty dim as

though the battery had been run down. But that doesn't do us any good."

"Does it or doesn't it?" Her eyes began to glow. "Brad, maybe we've been on the wrong tack. You went to Walter's Spot often?"

"I told you that we were in a rut. We went every Friday night and after we left we always went up to that parking spot. Kid stuff. It was the first place I kissed her."

"How far is it out of town?"

He shrugged. "Three miles. No more than that."

"Crandall could find out about that routine?"

"Nora, I've told you that Anna may have told him about it, even. We had nothing to be ashamed of."

She began to pace again. He asked a question, but she waved her hand impatiently. He sank down in the chair she had vacated and lit another cigarette. His mouth was dry and parched and he had a dull ache behind his eyes.

He drifted back into sullen apathy. He wondered grimly how it would be to serve time. Political enemies would make certain that he did.

Nora stopped suddenly and began to laugh. It was a throaty laugh at first, and it climbed higher and higher. She turned, her fingernails digging into her cheeks, her eyes wild, her laughter filling the small room. He held her by the shoulders and shook her, and still she laughed. At last he slapped her. Hard. She swayed, walked woodenly to the couch, lay down on her face and began to cry.

Five minutes later she sat up, her face rigid. "Let's go get him, Brad. I know how it was done."

JOHAN CRANDALL hung up the room phone and chuckled. The little damn fool that she was. Of course, she was pretty keen to sense the truth, but she wasn't keen enough to find out how it had been done. No man was that keen. No man or no woman. He had wrapped Whelan up like a Christmas goose. A package for the can.

That phone call had obviously been planned to rattle him. Well, he wouldn't let it rattle him at all. There was no other reason for her to tell him that she and

Brad Whelan were going to relive the evening that had turned out to be Anna's last. Yes, Brad was going to take her to Walter's and then out to the parking spot at the crest of the hill. She was going to leave him, and then he was going to drive down to where she walked beside the highway. He would be driving the rented car. His own car was being held as an exhibit.

Crandall smiled with satisfaction. Not only was it a childish plan, but it proved to him that neither Nora nor Whelan had the faintest inkling of the proof. That was the beauty of the plan. Because even if they did get a faint suspicion, there was no way on God's earth that they could prove it. Not one single way.

He spread the catalogues on the bed and began to jot down specification. A thirty-six-foot cruiser would seem to fill the bill. He'd be able to hire a man to run it and do the cooking. The Inland Waterway to Florida looked attractive. Get off to far places and start drinking again without the fear of talking too much.

Anna, dead, was a very profitable item. He wondered why he hadn't thought of it before. And lucky that he had thought of it when he did. Whelan had been working on Anna. He had been responsible for Anna's cutting the allowance and, given more time, he might have gotten Anna to change the will.

The phone rang again. He sighed in annoyance. "Hello."

"Is this Mr. Crandall?"

"Speaking."

"This is Mr. Bishop, attorney for Mrs. Crandall. We met the other day."

"Yes, we met."

"Sorry to bother you this time of the evening, Mr. Crandall, but I wanted to report that we've just come across a later will prepared by Mrs. Crandall. It very definitely supersedes the one that was read the other day. I can't understand why Mrs. Crandall should have gone to another attorney to have this new will prepared and—"

"What does the new will say?"

"Why, I'm afraid the information was given me in confidence, Mr. Crandall. I just called to make certain you wouldn't make any commitments based on your—ah—expectations, shall we say."

Crandall took a deep breath. He made his voice calm, concealing the panic. "Look, old man. I'm about to sign a few contracts here. On the basis of the new will, Mr. Bishop, should I go ahead, or hold off?"

"I shouldn't tell you this, Mr. Crandall, but the new will leaves you nothing. It merely names you as an alternate heir in case Mrs. Crandall's sister should die without issue. I say, are you still there, Mr. Crandall? Mr. Crandall! Are you there?"

"I'm here," John Crandall said wearily. "Thanks for calling."

He slammed the phone back on the hook, lay down across the bed, wrinkling the catalogues.

For a long time he lay very still. Then suddenly he lifted his head, looked intently at the blank wall. He slid off the bed, padded to the bureau, found the bottle and up-ended it until warmth began to spread out in the middle of him. He capped the bottle, wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. He stood very still for a long time, then glanced at his watch. From another bureau drawer he took cotton gloves, a pencil flashlight, a heavy, stubby screwdriver and a small, adjustable-head wrench.

His topcoat concealed the bulge in his pockets. He walked across the street, unlocked the door of his cheap coupe, drove steadily toward the city limits.

In his heart was black and bitter anger. From time to time he thudded the heel of his hand against the rim of the steering wheel.

WALTER'S SPOT was a blare of neon, a thick pulse of music, an orderly array of cars illuminated by a parking lot light.

He stood for a time, waiting and listening. Then he began to walk between the rows of cars. He found two cars with the small, neat, white lettering of the rental agency on the left-hand door.

He shone the flashlight inside each one. He smiled tightly as over the back of the front seat of the second one he saw the cloth coat which Nora had worn when she had come with Whelan to his room.

He crouched, slipped on the gloves and went to work.

This time he was able to select the spot carefully. Before it had been luck. He had driven by the parking place just to see if Whelan had gone over onto the soft ground where the tire marks would show. He had turned and headed back toward town and had recognized Anna in the glare of his lights. That had been almost incredible luck. It had made the whole thing far easier than waiting and getting her at her apartment and taking her back out.

It was easier to stop the car, to kill Anna then and there and sprinkle the fragments of glass around, than to take her from her apartment after Brad had left her at the end of the evening, take her back out to the lonely road and kill her. And it made Brad's position even less tenable, as he would not attempt to insist to the police that he had in fact taken Anna home.

Later he had had no trouble sneaking into the garage where Whelan kept his car. No trouble at all. The attendant had been sleeping peacefully.

It would be the same this time.

His car was parked two hundred yards down the road, backed into the bushes, ready to start. He stood in heavy tree shadows near the shoulder of the road, wishing he could smoke, wishing he had brought the bottle with him.

When they drove by on the way to the parking spot, he smiled. He had made identification of their car easy.

He tensed. It would not be long now.

A distant train hooted with a lonesome sound. He thought that for two murders in a row they'd probably hang Whelan.

The night seemed alien and alive. He pulled his collar up higher. No cars passed.

There was a hint of rain in the air. The freshened breeze rattled the leaves of fall, wisped them around his ankles.

At last he heard it, dimmed by the wind. The firm *tap-tap* of feminine heels coming down the slope toward him. His eyes were accustomed to the darkness. He squinted, and at last he saw the slim form walking down toward him.

He tensed himself for the spring. Now she was twenty feet away. Fifteen. Ten. Five.

There was a quick rasp of his feet among the leaves. "Good-evening, Nora," he said, lifting his arm to strike.

The silent flash seemed to fill the whole world. It blinded him and he staggered back, his arm still raised.

Whelan's hard, triumphant voice said, "Move a muscle, Crandall, and I'll pump one of these slugs into your belly."

* * *

Brad Whelan sat, cool and unfriendly, beside Morgansen's desk. The morning sun streamed through the window at a flat angle. Nora sat in front of the desk. Gus Rike stood looking down at the objects which had been taken out of John Crandall's pockets before he was thrown into a cell, minus belt, necktie and shoe-laces.

"Get it through your thick head, Rike!" Morgansen said with irritation. "Here's the glass he busted out of the headlamp. That was to sprinkle on the road near the girl's body. Lab would match it to the lamp of the rented car. These here are the bolts and nuts from the grill guard. This is the grill guard. Now take a look at the picture. The girl took it with a little Argus with a flash attachment. Whelan

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was following her with his shoes off and a gun in his hand."

Rike picked up the enlargement. Brad knew what he would see. Crandall, his face distorted, the heavy grill guard up-raised, ready to smash it down, to crush Nora's skull.

MORGANSEN gave Rike the story. "Yeah, they got a guy to phone and pretend to be the lawyer. He told Crandall the will was no good and to make it good he had to kill the sister here. She'd already phoned to tell him about the reenactment. Crandall was going to smash her, sprinkle glass, take off, and then follow Whelan, lights out, and find a chance to bolt the grill guard back on the front bumper. When he killed his wife, he sneaked back into the garage and bolted it back on Whelan's car. We had holes in our heads, Rike. We never figured that heavy curved bar could be used separately. We figured he had to use the whole car, and Whelan was the only one who could have used the car."

Rike nodded heavily. "No chance that Crandall got the idea from the first killing and that the first killing was Whelan's baby?"

Morgansen grinned at Whelan. "Gus hates to give up. No, Gus. We got Crandall's full confession."

Gus gave Whelan a moody look. "Sorry, guy," he mumbled.

Whelan took a deep breath. "I don't like to be hard, Morgansen. Your boys tried to make the frame tighter by beating me up. Anybody who comes in here can get beaten up the same way. And I don't like that at all. You countenanced the beatings."

"That's a big word, Whelan," Morgansen said slowly.

"For a few days I'm going to be news. I'm going to talk to reporters. I'm going to blow this sadistic police system of yours sky high. You got the job on politics, but you're going to lose it because you can't handle it, Morgansen. I'm going to see to that."

"Shut the door, Gus," Morgansen snapped.

Morgansen leaned on the desk and his small eyes were the color of lead. "Okay,

fellah. We got the negative. We got the evidence. Maybe Crandall talked too hasty. Maybe you can be right back in a box."

Nora smiled sweetly. "Please, Mr. Policeman. Your nice man downstairs gave me two prints. I mailed one to the *Journal*, along with a little statement not over two hours ago. If we sit real still we may hear them hollering about an extra. And I'll bet it's already been broadcast over the early news."

Whelan smiled for the first time. "That wasn't smart, Morgansen. I was only going to demand the resignations of Rike and Barret. Now you go too. Happy landings."

Neither Rike nor Morgansen made the slightest move to stop them as they got up and left.

Down in the street Nora offered her hand. "See you at the trial, I guess, Brad."

"You can't walk out like this!" he protested.

"Oh, but I can. I look like Anna and I talk a little like Anna and you've still got Anna in your blood. Let's give it a rest, Brad. Then you'll know better."

"How long a rest?"

"A year, Brad. I have more school, you know."

"In a year maybe you'll find somebody else."

"If I do," she said, "I'll tell them to wait until Brad Whelan has had a chance to get blondes named Nash out of his system."

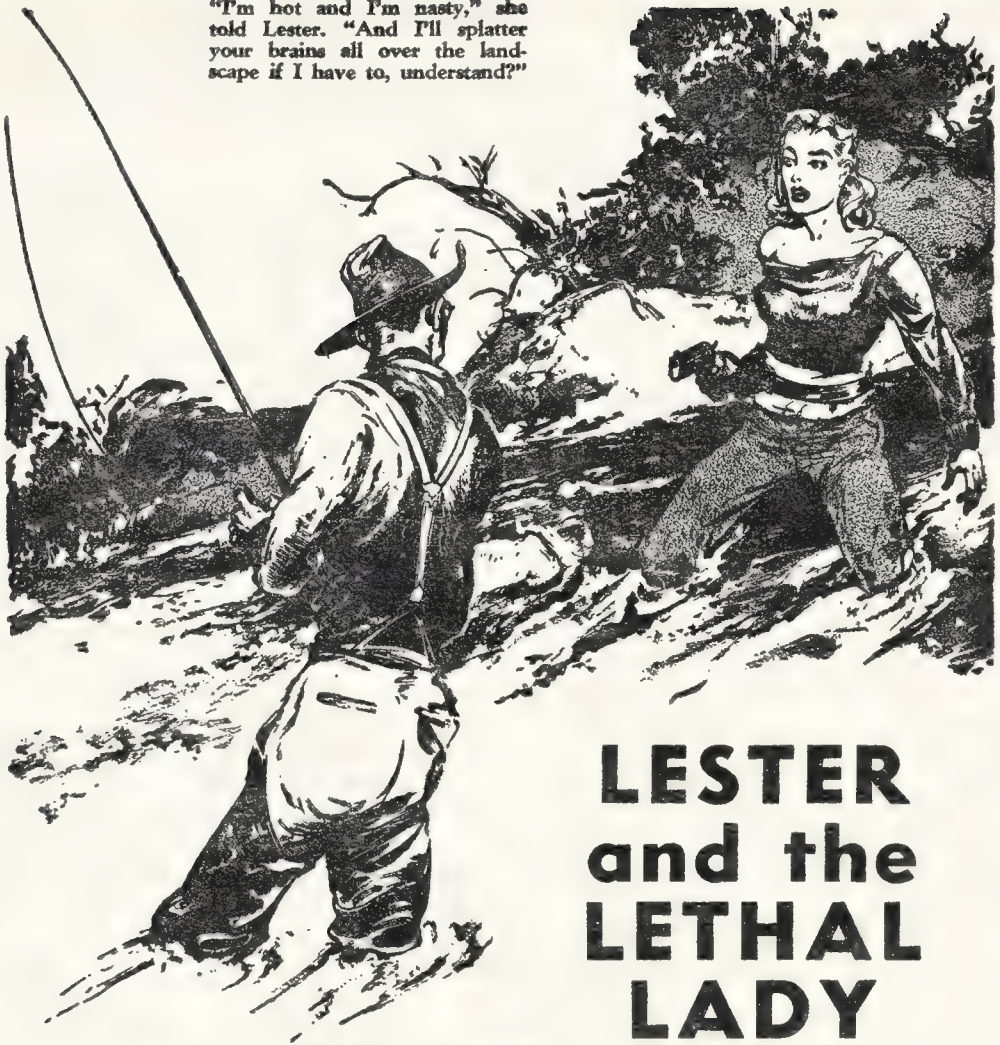
"Why do you keep edging off like that?"

"Really, Brad, I *must* get to the *Journal*. You see, I still have that extra picture in my purse."

She walked quickly down the street. Brad stood and wearily shook his head. He wondered if, in a year, he'd still be thinking about this girl who could figure a murder by realizing that what had looked like dim lights was in fact one headlight, this girl who could bluff a whole police department, this girl who could trap a killer and then weep tears of pity over him all the way back to the city.

As she turned the corner he decided that it would be a very long year.

"I'm hot and I'm nasty," she told Lester. "And I'll splatter your brains all over the landscape if I have to, understand?"



LESTER and the LETHAL LADY

By **ALAN RITNER ANDERSON**

Lester Quigley was probably the mildest, meekest, scarest, most-benpecked guy ever to get involved with two killers. And somebody, sure as God made little apples, was going to be sorry!

LESTER QUIGLEY kept on fishing. He was a city man and the wail of a siren was commonplace. It was to the north, seemingly miles away. It rose to a high scream, fell in a swift diminuendo, then started all over again. It didn't occur to him that he was deep in a forest of Pennsylvania's mighty

Alleghenies and there wasn't a fire house, hospital or police station within fifty miles. The village four miles south of his camp site used a gong to sound alarms—an iron triangle and hammer hung from a rafter of the porch of the general store.

If the meek were destined to inherit the earth, Lester Quigley would fare

handsomely. He was a small, tidy man of thirty-five with wavy brown hair and hazel eyes made enormous by the thick lenses of horn-rimmed spectacles he removed only at bedtime. His habitual expression was that of a small boy viewing his first elephant. For Quigley had trouble. He had double trouble. All because he was a mouse, a rabbit, a spineless jellyfish—the product of a childhood dominated by two shrewish old maid aunts.

The wail of the siren disturbed Quigley's dismal reverie. He stood in the center of the narrow, knee-deep stream with white-capped riffles hissing and gurgling around his hip boots. He wore blue denim trousers and a scarlet shirt, the latter for protection against wayward deer hunters. The deer season was four months away, but he had heard of men hunting out of season and was taking no chances.

Lester Quigley had a wife. Hester was a buxom blonde with an upper-bracket will power and a one-track mind. Quigley's fifteen years with the Randacker Iron Works gave him seniority for the recently vacated position of office manager. Hester had reduced the problem to its simplest equation. Lester would march right up to J. S. Morehouse and demand his just rights. That was all. Just walk into the cage and slap the lion! J. S. Morehouse was a mean-tempered, explosive man with a bull-like bellow and a soul-shaking brand of invective. Quigley was afraid to ask J. S. the time of day.

The siren stopped shrieking. Quigley nodded absently, muttered, "Big fire, I guess." Thoughts of confronting J. S. made his knees go shaky. But if he didn't demand the job, he'd be without a wife. Hester had been adamant. Worse, her former boss had offered to take her back at a handsome increase in salary. Quigley felt that fate had delivered a vicious below-the-belt blow. His fear of J. S. was almost psychopathic. Try as he would, he could think of no heroic lamb-turned-lion stories applicable to his present dilemma.

Quigley fished with a lead sinker as bait so he wouldn't catch anything. He liked fish broiled and garnished with parsley, not alive and wriggling. He didn't

know why he liked to stand in the swirling waters of a creek pretending to fish. But in some strange way it promoted the inner peace and serenity which enabled him to think out his problems with a refreshing clarity of mind. So when Hester had left in a huff to weekend with her mother, he had taken the train to the village and walked up to his favorite camp site. The trouble was, it was Sunday afternoon and he hadn't even dented his dismal dilemma.

From far, far away came a sound alien to the scene but familiar to Quigley's ears. He cocked his head and listened intently. The baying of hounds. He nodded. "Ah, a fox hunt." There was a hunt club near the suburban community where the Quigleys lived, and they often followed the chase by car via back roads in a zestful game of hide and seek that called for dextrous driving. Hester was a skillful driver. But she took savage delight in depressing the brake pedal at the last moment to make her timid husband jam his feet against the floorboards. She did it so often that he always got out of the car with his leg muscles aching. Try as she would, Hester couldn't break him of the habit.

Sighing unhappily, Quigley continued to go through the motions of fishing. He had never heard of trout hungry enough to strike a lead sinker; nevertheless he cast into shallow water where no sizable fish was likely to venture.

THE WOMAN seemed to materialize out of the creek. Quigley froze. All he could see was the muzzle of the .45 automatic in her right hand. It looked like the mouth of a cannon. The woman was tiny, thirtyish, and her brown eyes were large and menacing.

Voice edged, she said, "You heard the siren. You heard the dogs. You can add. I crashed out of the pen, see!" She brandished the pistol. "I had to shoot two guards. I'm hot. I'm nasty. I'll splatter your brains all over the landscape if I have to, understand?"

Quigley couldn't speak. A jail break! The woman was maybe five feet in height, and he doubted if she weighed more than a hundred pounds. She wore a grey sweat shirt, much too large for her, and

her brown slacks were doubled lengthwise at her waist and secured by a wide black leather belt. Her white face glittered beneath a veneer of sweat, and a fallen leaf looked fantastically out of place in the brassy blonde of her hair. The creek swirled around her thighs and she had to lean back into the current to stand solidly.

To the north the hounds continued their deep-throated baying. Some of the strain left the woman's pale face. "They haven't hit the creek yet," she said. "Look, chum. I'm Maxine Helwig. I'm a three-time killer serving a life rap. I was in there seven lousy years. I'm not going back. Not alive. I've got a big .45 and two extra clips. It took a long time for my pal Vasco and me to work this out. You fit, chum. You being up here was just what the doctor ordered."

"Yes, ma'am," said Quigley, his voice a squeak. He cleared his throat and repeated more firmly, "Yes, ma'am."

"I just want you to get the score," said Maxine Helwig in her razor-edged voice that reminded Quigley of his two aunts. "Vasco's been up a week. He cased the village. He saw you arrive. He trailed you up here. It was visitors' day. Vasco gave me the score in the double-talk we'd figured out. I waded into the creek at the sawmill. The search party will split the bloodhounds and work this way on each side of the creek to pick up the trail where I come out. What'll they think when they pass here and don't see you?"

"They'll think I got scared and went to the village," said Quigley unhappily. He didn't know much about guns. He had been in the finance department of the Army during the war. But once in a

while the M. P.'s who guarded the money let him examine their Army Colts. The pistol in Maxine Helwig's right hand was ready for business, no doubt about it.

"Right," she agreed. "They'll think you beat it down to the village. So they look for the spot where I leave the creek. Only I don't leave the creek, see? Not to leave a trail for those damn hounds."

The rather contradictory statement confused Quigley, but he said, "Yes, ma'am."

Maxine Helwig glanced at the camp site. She blinked. Quigley's sleeping bag and knapsack were surrounded by a rope that formed a circle some ten feet in diameter.

"Why the rope?"

Quigley felt his ears go hot. "Snakes," he said. I read in a book that snakes won't crawl over a rope."

"Bet you keep an umbrella at home and one at the office," she said.

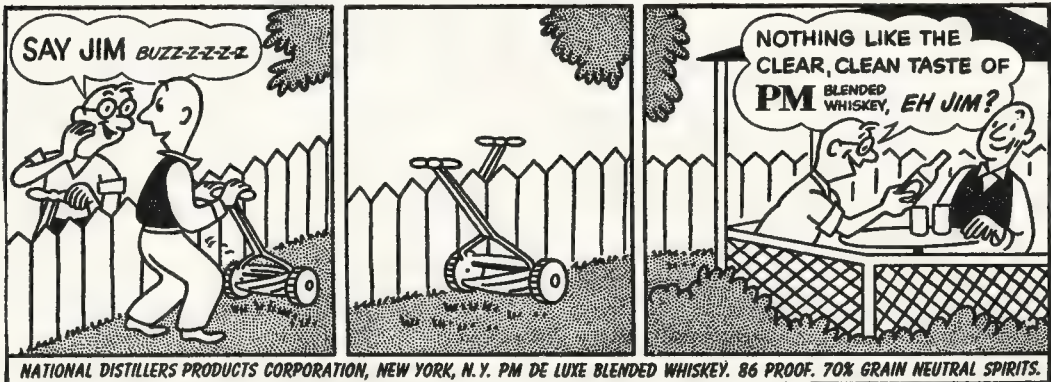
It was the gospel truth and he felt his face burn. "Yes, ma'am," he confessed.

The music of the hounds ceased, and there was a sudden silence like the hush presaging a thunderstorm. Maxine Helwig's eyes brightened from brown to yellow. She licked her lips. "They're a half-mile upstream," she said. "You get the score, don't you? You know what you're going to do, don't you?"

"No, ma'am," he said.

"Why, honey," she said, "you're going to carry me piggy-back so I won't leave a trail those damn hounds will strike. Just pretend you're Sinbad the Sailor. Drop that pole!"

Quigley did so. It fell into the creek with a soft splash and came to rest on a sand bar.



Her edged voice went rich with threat. "Turn around. Bend over. Put your hands on your knees and brace yourself."

Quigley complied. He bent over slightly, his hands clutching his legs just above the knees, the rubber boots cold and clammy beneath his sweaty palms. The sight of the bamboo pole on the sand bar gave him a ray of hope. It might be seen from shore and . . .

HE STOPPED thinking when the muzzle of the pistol jabbed the nape of his neck. "Steady," she warned. A slim forearm went under his chin. She gave a small leap, straddled the small of his back and locked her legs around his waist, crossing her ankles to do so. He was surprised to see that her feet were bare. Water from her soaked trousers dripped into his boot tops and ran icily down his legs.

"Wade ashore," she commanded.

He climbed into the grassy clearing. It was the ultimate in humiliation, of ignominy. Pack animal to a wisp of a woman no bigger than a twelve-year-old! How could he ever face the men and women of the office again, let alone J.S. Morehouse?

"Stop," she ordered. Quigley stopped abreast of the circle of rope. "Now, listen," she said. "Don't get any cute ideas unless you want to be a dead hero. Vasco studied up on bloodhounds. The wind's to our back. That's good. But it might shift. You carry me out to the village road, see? But be careful not to brush me against anything that might hold my scent. Catch?"

"Yes, ma'am," he said.

The rutted, rocky road to the village was a quarter of a mile from the camp site. The terrain was a series of gently sloped hills covered with a profusion of wild blackberry bushes. Quigley began to sweat. He had read that rattlesnakes were fond of blackberries. The horrible thought short-circuited his nervous system, and he couldn't move a muscle.

"Get going," she ordered.

He told her about the rattlesnakes and blackberries, added hopefully, "I have an anti-rattlesnake-venom kit in my knapsack."

She ground the muzzle of the .45 into his sweaty neck. "Buster, this carries a sting too. Get started!"

Quigley circled the rope and walked into the maze of bushes. Maxine Helwig's weight seemed to increase ten pounds with every ten feet he covered. He walked doggedly, his muscles tiring and his nerves electric. His clothes became wet with sweat and his right heel blossomed an exquisitely tender blister. He traversed a zig-zag course to avoid brushing against the branches of the blackberry plants. He began to sniff the air, gustily, like a dog at a tree trunk.

"What's the idea?" she asked.

"I'm smelling for snakes," he admitted.

"Rattlesnakes smell like cucumbers. I read it in a book."

"Shut up and keep going!"

He blundered out into the road before he knew it. There was a black car parked to his right some twenty feet away. The lid of the empty luggage compartment was raised and there was no partition between the storage space in rear and the interior. The right half of the front seat back was tilted forward. It was a business coupe better than ten years old. Paint had flaked from the body and the fenders were rusty. The tires, however, appeared to be brand new.

A man stepped through a hedge on the opposite side of the road. He was a short, squat man with a big belly and long arms.

"Like a charm, Vasco," said Maxine Helwig.

Vasco nodded. He glared at Quigley. "Take her to the car. Back around so she can get into the luggage compartment without touching a foot on the ground."

"Yes, sir," said Quigley.

He turned and waddled toward the coupe, Maxine Helwig by that time weighing a ton. Both saw a pile of small evergreen trees on the edge of the road.

"Why the Christmas trees?" she asked.

Vasco said, "You two ride under the rear deck right behind the seat. I load the trees in back of you. I got a bill of sale for those trees in case we're stopped."

"I thought you had an out," she said anxiously.

"I have. An abandoned road the elec-

tric company made when they strung a rural electrification line through here. It's a hell of a road, one hell of a road. I figure the cops might have a road block on the highway. I got the bill of sale from a nursery thirty miles north of here."

"You think of everything," she said.

"I'm money-hungry. I figure a nice cut of that loot you got stashed away." To Quigley he said, "Snap it up, bud, snap it up!"

Quigley, who'd slowed to a snail's pace, hurried to the rear of the coupe. He bent over and backed under the raised lid. The woman let go and skidded the seat of her pants across the metal floor. Quigley stepped out from under the lid and straightened up feeling light-headed and giddy.

"I, ah, have to catch the seven o'clock train," he said. "I have to be at work at eight tomorrow morning. I haven't been late to work in my life. They gave me a watch for not being tardy."

Vasco said, "We'll drive you in, bud. We'll get you there in time to punch the clock."

Quigley protested feebly, "Sometimes I get car sick. I'd rather take the train."

Quigley never even saw the fist that chopped him into unconsciousness.

THERE was a jarring, jolting sense of motion, of being bounced up and down on a hard surface. Quigley fought his way back to consciousness realizing that he was gagged. His mouth was stuffed with cloth, his lips sealed with a strip of adhesive. He was breathing through his nose with a soft snoring sound.

He cracked his eyes open. There was a band of greyness above him, and he saw light shining between the tops of the seat backs and the storage shelf that stretched the width of the car. The air of the luggage compartment smelled pleasantly of evergreens, and pine needles probed his hair to tickle his scalp.

Maxine Helwig's voice came from the right. "Take it easy," she warned. "I'm not on a cushion like you are."

Vasco didn't reply. Quigley squirmed. He discovered that his arms were lashed to his sides by a web belt that circled his

chest. His ankles were lashed side by side and his legs were pulled up so high that his knees and chin almost touched. His legs were held erect by a rope that went across the backs of his knees and under his shoulder blades. He lifted his legs higher to relieve the cramp in his legs, and the rope slid down the backs of his upper legs and struck the floor with a soft thud.

Vasco was driving like fury. He was going far too fast for the condition of the road and the age of the car. Tires squealed and fenders flapped. Now and then the rear wheels skidded and the back of the car would weave. At such times, Vasco would ease up on the accelerator and the coupe would straighten out. Their reckless speed made Quigley freeze with horror. He broke out in a cold sweat. His heart hammered in fear.

They topped a rise, then started down a steep hill with the sickening lurch and gather speed of a roller coaster taking the first dip. Fenders flapped and springs squealed. The rear of the car began to wag and weave.

Vasco stepped on the brake.

Lester Quigley's act was pure reflex. He was in the car and Hester had zoomed up behind a truck. He clamped his eyes closed and stepped on the floorboards. Only his nonskid soles didn't strike the boards under the dash. His feet struck the hinged back of the driver's seat dead center! Vasco screamed as his belly sank into the base of the steering wheel. The yell unnerved Quigley. He pushed harder. The horn began to blare.

There was a thunderous, woody crack. Then something passed grindingly over the car roof. There was a crash of metal, high and shrill. The interior of the car came alive with blue-white electric sparks. The coupe leaped into space. It dropped. It tumbled as it turned, and it struck a rock ledge on its left side. A sledge hammer blow caught Quigley in the center of his forehead. His senses went dead.

THE HOSPITAL ROOM had a cracked ceiling. It was an annoying crack that thumbed its nose at geometric neatness. The thin nurse saw Lester Quigley's open eyes. She tiptoed out of the room. He groaned. His head was a

leaden sphere. He raised his hands. His right thumb was swollen to twice its normal size. His head was bandaged right down to his eyebrows.

Hester came in. Her eyes were red rimmed, her nose shiny, and her brassy yellow hair in wild disarray. She looked beautiful. She kissed him with a possessive fervor that made him feel grand.

"You're not to talk!" she warned. "You have a concussion. The car hit and broke a pole. It cut off the electricity. A repair crew found you. The man's dead. The woman has a fractured skull. And you're about the biggest hero this town's had since the war. A bound and gagged man risking his life. . ."

"But, Hester," he protested.

"I know, darling," she said, voice soft, "you were pushing the floorboards,

as usual. But who's to know? You're office manager by proclamation. Mr. Morehouse is like a hero-worshipping kid about it. Don't say anything! I know you're just the same old Lester Quigley. But once a hero, always a hero. People won't forget what you did. You can coast along on that glory for the rest of your life, darling. You'll see. A word from you and that office force will snap to it a lot faster than if J.S. had bellowed at them."

Quigley saw the light. "I, ah, better try to break myself of the habit of pushing the floorboards every time somebody steps on the brakes," he mused. "Somebody might get wise."

"Darling," Hester said, "I don't think you'll ever push the floorboards again. Not after what it got you this time."

THE STORY THEY COULDN'T PRINT

ACCORDING to the films coming out of Hollywood, there is nothing but animosity between detectives and the newspapermen assigned to cover their activities. The movies would have us believe police reporters will go to any length to print the news, even if it means jeopardizing the solution of a crime. Like many other situations portrayed on a movie screen, this is tripe. Actually there is more good will and cooperation between the press and police than is generally known.

A case in point was the mugging-murder in New York of John Martin, an elderly club steward. Martin was found in the small hours of the morning sprawled in his doorway; he was unconscious and had been viciously beaten about the abdomen. He was rushed to a hospital where he died the next day; one of his broken ribs had punctured a lung.

The police had no trouble reconstructing the manner of Martin's murder. He was killed by two or more men. One had grabbed him around the neck with his forearms and pulled the old man's head back in a vise-like grip; the other man or men had driven their fists over and over again into the old man's ribs and pit of his stomach. When he finally lost consciousness they robbed him and ran.

Captain Franklin Dunn, in charge of the East Side detectives, called in the police reporters of the nine New York dailies and said, "Sooner or later we'll pick up the men who did this. If they don't know Martin is dead, they may admit the mugging, figuring on being convicted for robbery only. Therefore I'm asking you men not to print the story of Martin's death." The reporters agreed to play along with the police.

Two weeks later two men were caught in the act of mugging John Hickey, a stock exchange employee. Because the attack on Hickey took place only four blocks from where Martin was murdered, and virtually the same method was used in both cases, the police began questioning Hickey's assailants about the Martin case.

The two hoodlums broke down and confessed attacking Martin, implicating two other men in the job. To their dismay they soon learned they had confessed not to robbery but to murder. In his report to his superiors, Captain Dunn said the case could never have been solved without the cooperation of the New York press.

HOMICIDAL HOOK-UP

Linesman Ernie Corson listened to one conversation too many . . . when he first hooked into his two-timing wife's telephone call—and then listened to the Grim Reaper's advice!

THE POLICE didn't have to go chasing after Ernie Corson; they found him where Kenneth Matlock had left him, sitting in the somber darkness of Matlock's funeral parlor.

Everyone in Middle Township, New Jersey, knew twenty-nine-year-old Ernie Corson. He had gone off to war with the other young men of the district and had spent a good deal of time in such places as Iwo Jima and Okinawa before returning to his family. He had a pretty, high-spirited wife, Eleanor, one year younger than he, and four sturdy little boys, ranging in age from six months to seven years. His parents were people of some local prominence: His mother was active in women's affairs and his father was a Middle Township Committeeman. Ernie was known as a sober, hard-working young man who supported his burgeoning family by working as a maintenance man for the local telephone company.

If it weren't for Ernie's occupation he might never have known about the other man. While up on a pole scouting for line trouble Ernie accidentally hooked into a conversation between a man and a woman. He was about to remove his leads from the line when he recognized the woman's voice as belonging to his wife, Eleanor. The man she was conversing with was plainly her lover. Ernie remained on the pole for fifteen minutes, quietly getting an earful.

At the dinner table that evening, after the kids had been put to bed, he had it out with his wife. She defiantly admitted her affair with the other man, saying it had begun while her husband was overseas, and adding that she had no intention of breaking it off. Ernie left the table in something of a daze. He packed his things and moved into his parents' home.

A week or so later he phoned Eleanor and, in a rather formal tone, asked her to

By
SKIPPY
ADELMAN

meet him somewhere so they might talk over the details of a divorce. Eleanor agreed. He picked her up in his car and they talked while he drove.

Ernie parked the car along the isolated Kings-Nummy trail and before he fully realized what he was doing, found himself abandoning the subject of a divorce and pleading with Eleanor to return to him. Eleanor regarded him scornfully and told him he was wasting his time.

Two hours later Ernie Corson, his wife still beside him, drove his car into the town of Cape May Courthouse, in Middle Township, and pulled up in front of the Matlock Funeral Home. He strode inside and without any preliminaries, told Kenneth Matlock, "I have a job for you; its out there in the car."

Matlock grinned. Ernie was an old acquaintance; small-town undertakers take a good deal of kidding from their friends because of their rather bizarre profession, and Matlock figured this was another rib. He looked out of his doorway and recognized Eleanor, sitting with her back toward him, in Ernie's car. He ambled out to say hello.

The undertaker spoke to the woman but she didn't answer. He reached through the open window and touched her hand. It was cold and beginning to stiffen. Thoroughly frightened, he looked closer. It was then he noticed the contorted face and heavy purple bruises around her throat. Matlock broke and ran up the street to get a doctor, but he needn't have bothered; Eleanor Corson had been dead some two hours.

IF THE CORPSE FITS—



What's a smart police reporter to do when the guy he's tagged as a killer . . . turns out to be the guy someone else had already tagged as a corpse?

CHAPTER ONE

Footsteps to Murder

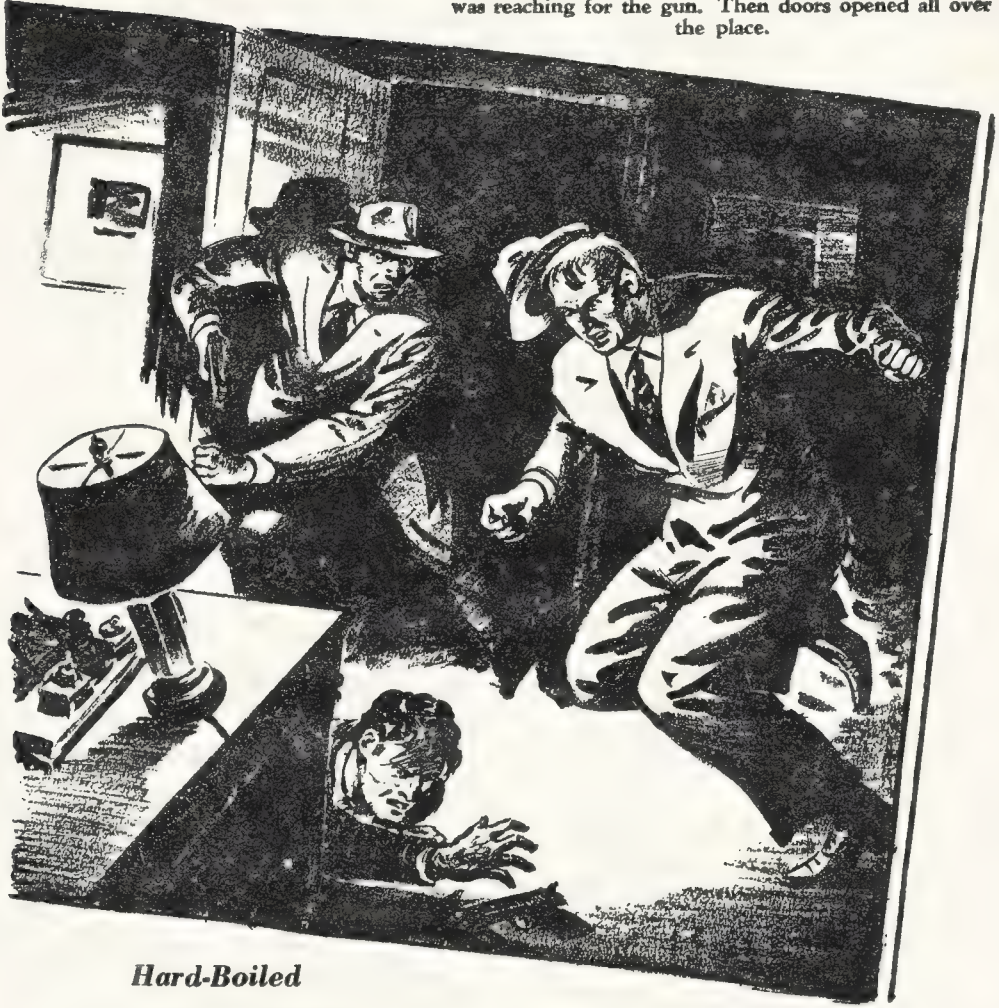
PATSY was frowning when he came into the office. As he talked, the frown deepened and his bushy eyebrows reached across to touch one another. Patsy always frowns when he is thinking. Thinking is something he isn't very good at, and it gives him a headache.

Patsy O'Rourke is an ex-policeman

turned private investigator. He has one of those hole-in-the-wall-with-a-water-cooler offices on Wells Street, and can be hired to do anything he won't hang for. Patsy isn't too bright, but he has the nerve to make up for it. He'll wade into things brainier men won't go near.

I first met Patsy when he was chasing

Patsy crossed the room and kicked at the hand that was reaching for the gun. Then doors opened all over the place.



Hard-Boiled
Homicide Novelette

By
MASON NOBLE

down some diamonds for Lebanon Brothers, the importers, and since then I've tagged along whenever something juicy comes up. Crime isn't my field. I belong to the *Courier* sports staff, and I'm more at home in a press box than at a lineup. But the old man will drop a bonus now and then for a good feature yarn, and the

extra dough comes in handy. So I usually reach for my hat as soon as Patsy gives me a lead.

He had been telling me about a case he was on. Some bird named Glade had shelled out fifty bucks to have a girl followed. The job didn't seem to amount to anything, and I got the idea that Patsy didn't like it. He was talking on in a bewildered tone of voice.

"Glade didn't seem to know exactly what he wanted. He just told me to watch the girl and report where she went and who she went with."

"Who's Glade?" I asked.

"Rodney Glade. He works for a La-Salle Street broker, and he's an old friend of the Williamsons—the girl's family. He and Blanche were pretty thick."

"How thick?"

"They were engaged."

I shrugged my shoulders. "So for two days you follow her around and eat lunch in expensive restaurants, and now what?"

"She went the usual places." He went on, "Swimming, hairdresser, matinee—all routine. Then tonight she came out about nine o'clock, dressed all in white, and in a hurry. I followed her downtown and into the Cambray Club."

"Eddie Lane's place." I whistled. "A nice spot for a little girl to lose a million bucks."

"She didn't go near the tables. I guess she had the password, because she went right upstairs. I waited around and dropped ten iron men at roulette as fast as I could get it out of my pocket. She was gone a long time. I was about ready to start breaking furniture to get upstairs to her, when she came back down, looking like someone had just handed her another million. I followed her, and she went right home."

"So she spent a peachy evening in a gambler's private office." I smirked. "But where's a story in that? Our scandal page wouldn't touch the Williamson name with a ten-foot pole."

"She was murdered fifteen minutes ago."

He was so smug when he said it that I could have thrown the telephone at him. Downstairs they were breaking their necks to get out a morning edition, and this overgrown oaf sits in my office with the

biggest story since the Walters kidnaping, and I have to force it out of him. I got Burke on the phone, gave him what I knew, and told him to set it up in type and hold everything until I could verify it.

I grabbed my hat. "All right, stupid. Let's go have a look at this million-dollar corpse."

IN THE CAB I asked, "How do you know she's dead?"

"Glade just called me."

"How does he know?"

"I don't know."

I laughed and clapped my hands. "Goody! Guessing games! Don't you ever get a case where you know something of what's going on?"

Patsy had fallen silent and he was frowning again.

I needled him further. "Think Glade killed her?"

He looked as if I had profaned his mother. "They were going to be married." He said it like a prayer. Patsy still has faith in true love and the daily double. I decided to shut up.

We pulled up in front of a South Shore cottage. It was a brick job, with the lake and a private beach in back, and sand all around it. The road, passing in front, turned abruptly to the left and went the full length of the house as though it were going right on into the lake, then turned back and went on. A couple of lonely trees stood out in front. They must have been put there a long time ago and forgotten. They didn't look very happy about it. The place was large enough if you weren't greedy and didn't have more than a hundred house guests at a time. There was a cement porch across the front and small imitation balconies at the first floor windows along both sides. There were blue uniforms crawling over everything.

Inside, Lieutenant Donovan was pacing the floor, badgering a roomful of butlers, maids, and chauffeurs, and a lean old gentleman with steel-grey hair.

I nudged Patsy and nodded at the old boy.

"Anthony Williamson." He grunted. "Blanche's uncle."

Williamson was explaining something. When he talked, his soft voice made the room seem quieter than it really was. "I

was in my room when I heard the shot. I had been there all evening, going over some papers for Blanche. I've managed the business for her since my brother's death." He added this last after a pause, as though he had expected someone to ask.

"Was it you that found the body, Mr. Williamson?" When Donovan talked, he rasped, as if the words were being forced from between two pieces of sandpaper.

"No. I came downstairs immediately, but the butler was already in the room. He must have been on this floor at the time."

I glanced around and picked out a door that might lead to the girl's room.

"Where is the girl's fiancé?" Donovan rasped again.

A frown touched the old man's face. It was so slight you wouldn't notice it unless you were watching closely. "I don't know. He lives only a few blocks from here, but his phone doesn't answer. I have been trying to get him all evening."

I nudged Patsy and we edged over toward the door. Donovan looked up and glared. He couldn't have been happier to see me if I'd been his mother-in-law.

"I know you two. You're Ken Branch, the nosy reporter; and that character with you is O'Rourke." He wasn't shouting, but I could hear him. "I've had trouble with you before."

I put on my most engaging manner. "Did I kill her, Lieutenant?"

"Go ahead. Crack wise. Maybe this time I won't think you're so funny. This is a police case. Go back to collecting divorce evidence."

I didn't think he was bluffing. He was worried. That meant it was a tough case and he wasn't making much headway. A bell rang, and as Donovan turned his back to pick up the telephone we slipped through the door.

We were in a hall. Down the hall there was a cop guarding one of the doors. That would be the girl's room. When I got closer I could see it was Grady, a good friend of mine. I got out a ten-dollar bill and folded it a couple of times before I handed it to him. Good friends are expensive.

"Maybe you didn't see us go in."

The cop nodded, and as he leaned over to tie his shoe, Patsy opened the door.

The room was small and frilly, decorated in pale pink. The windows, telephone, dressing table—everything—seemed to be wearing lace panties. It was a cozy little room to be murdered in.

Patsy was sniffing under and behind things. I wandered around and tried to look as if I was looking for something. The bed was covered with a sheet, the dead girl making a tidy bundle under it. I shuddered and moved away. On a glass ashtray by the window a cigarette had gone out. About one-quarter had burned away. The other end was brown enamel tipped, a fancy cigarette for fancy people. There was no lipstick on it.

WE BOTH reached the balcony at the same time. It was about two feet above the ground and hardly large enough for one person to stand on. I bent over and touched the cold cement floor. It was dirty with sand, wet sand that had fallen from someone's shoes quite recently. Patsy splayed a flashlight over the ground below. The evening's rain had leveled the sand. Clearly outlined were two distinct sets of footprints, one leading in a straight line from the road to the balcony, and the other returning to the road.

Patsy frowned and pointed toward the road. "The killer drove up in a car, parked out there, walked across to the balcony and climbed up here. He found the doors unlocked, came in and shot the girl while she slept. Then he returned the way he had come and drove off."

I nodded. "Let's get out of here before Donovan starts looking for us."

The cop didn't look around when we came out. The hall led to a rear door. On the way I found a telephone. It took only a minute to call Burke and okay the story.

It wasn't far to Glade's apartment, and he was waiting for us. He was a good-looking boy and would probably be pleasant company if you enjoyed bridge and afternoon tea dances. He brought us in to a comfortable room with a large fireplace and started fussing around with things. I've seen men frightened before, but this boy was scared silly. I expected him to start chewing his fingernails.

"Is it true? Is she really dead?" He seemed out of breath.

Patsy nodded. "About as dead as they

get. Somebody stood over her and put two bullets through her heart while she slept. I'm sorry, Mr. Glade. You should have told me she was in danger."

"I didn't know. I didn't know anyone would want to hurt her. I thought they wanted money. I thought—"

Patsy interrupted. "Why did you want her followed?"

"I was afraid she was in trouble. I couldn't understand why she kept seeing him. He must have wanted money."

"He?"

"I don't know who he was. A gangster, a gambler, someone from the Cambray Club. I used to take her there. She'd meet him at the bar and they'd go upstairs together. Then he started picking her up in front of the house. I was afraid for Blanche. I wanted to know what it was all about."

"She seemed like a gal who could take care of herself."

"But if it was money they wanted . . . She didn't have any."

That surprised even me, and I'm not easily surprised.

"Oh, she drew a small allowance," Glade went on to explain. "But the rest was in the estate, stock in Williamson Products—controlling interest, I believe. But by the provision of the trust she couldn't touch any of it until she came of age. Her birthday was next month."

Which didn't give Glade very much time, I thought.

Patsy asked, "What did he look like, the man she had been meeting?"

"I only saw him twice. He was a tall, thin man, and he always wore a black necktie."

I turned to Patsy. "Hatz?"

He nodded.

Candy Hatz was Lane's personal body-guard, and he took excellent care of the gambler. Anybody who wanted to see Eddie had to see Candy first.

Glade had his wallet out and was counting bills into Patsy's hand. "I want you to find the killer. I don't care what it takes to do it. There's five hundred more when you catch him."

I wandered over until I was alongside the boy. I tapped him lightly on the wrist. "Got a cigarette?"

He handed me a silver box from the

table. I separated one from the group and studied its brown enamel tip for a moment. Then I handed it back to him.

I smiled. "If you've got to smoke such conspicuous cigarettes, you shouldn't leave them lying around."

He didn't seem to know what I was talking about. He said simply, "What?"

"Were you and the girl really engaged?" I asked.

"Yes. You see, we—"

I cut in on him, "Was it announced?"

"No. But—"

"Buy her a ring?"

"No. You see, it was one of those things that had always been understood."

"Yeah! Who understood it, besides you?" I paused to let that sink in. "How did you know Blanche Williamson was dead, Glade?"

"Anthony, her uncle, called me as soon as it happened."

I shook my head. "You haven't been in all evening."

"But I have. I came in about seven and went to bed early. When Anthony's call awakened me, I phoned O'Rourke at once. Then I waited until you came."

"Look, I don't care where you were." I was getting angry. "You don't have to prove anything to me, because I don't throw any weight. But the police will be here in a few minutes, and, believe me, they'll want a story that makes sense. And another thing—the man who entered the Williamson house tonight left footprints. The police will want to know about those prints."

He was really frightened now. "Look here. You don't think I had anything to do with Blanche's death, do you?" He was talking more to Patsy than to me.

I answered again. "My opinions don't amount to much even when they're good. I don't know who killed who. Maybe you didn't kill the girl. But one thing I'm certain of, Sonny—you're sure dressed for the part."

CHAPTER TWO

Lights Out

IT TOOK us a while to find a cab. Patsy spent the time frowning and saying nothing. When we were on our way I

nudged him and grinned triumphantly. "What do you think of your little boy now?"

"He didn't kill her, Ken."

"Didn't he?" I said. "He lied about being engaged to her. He lied about being home tonight. He lied about Williamson calling. And he shouldn't lie to us, Patsy. He doesn't do it well enough."

"Why should he lie?" Patsy wanted to know.

"For the same reason we all lie—money. That LaSalle Street job can't pay him very much, and he looks like the kind of boy that would be good at spending money. If you check his budget tomorrow I'll bet you find he's right up to his ears in creditors."

"I'll check. But I don't see—"

"He wanted to marry her," I explained. "But somebody was cutting him out. Probably Lane. That's where you come in. You were hired to get a line on how good his chances were of marrying her before somebody else beat him to it. I don't think his chances were very good. I think he wasted his money."

"And you think he killed her." Sometimes Patsy can be stubborn.

"He wasn't home tonight. He smoked a cigarette in her bedroom. And five'll get you ten the police find those prints are his."

Patsy looked unbelieving. "What would he gain by killing her?"

He had me there. "I don't know. That's why I want to see Eddie Lane."

As we pulled up in front of the Cambray Club, I nudged Patsy again. "There weren't any reporters out there tonight."

"I know."

"That means somebody's having it hushed up."

"I know."

"When Donovan finds the story all over the front page of the *Courier*, he'll explode. That should put us in solid with the police."

Patsy was not particularly amused.

* * *

The Cambray Club is one of those red-plush night spots where you can dance, drink or have a cheese sandwich for the price of a turkey dinner. If it's excitement

you want, there's a room in the rear where they give you chips for your money, then take them right back from you.

The floor show was on, and a chorus of dolls in blue-and-white dance suits were kicking into a yellow spotlight. I noted a neat blonde on the end of the line. She had a pudgy nose that was cute; and even in the yellow light, her eyes were very blue. There was something about her that was friendly. I was quite close to the dance floor, and I could have sworn that she looked at me and smiled. Maybe it was just the light, but I suddenly felt very thirsty.

Patsy was tugging at my elbow. We made our way between the tiny tables to the room in the rear. It was deserted during the floor show, except for a couple of diehards at the dice table. Rising up from a corner in the back was a wide staircase, the marble and mahogany pathway to the inner sanctum. We headed for it.

On the stairs, a little man stepped out in front of us. He was so small a hearty sneeze would have knocked him over, but there was a bulge under his coat that kept people from sneezing. His hair was greased down flat on his head and his face was expressionless, except for a sneer where there should have been a mouth. He didn't yawn, but I had a feeling it would bore him terribly to have to kill us.

"You're going the wrong way, Jack." He said it quietly but emphatically.

Patsy had a try at being emphatic too. "We've come to see Eddie Lane."

The little man didn't move a muscle. "Never heard of him. You must have the wrong place."

I tried my hand. "Look here, Benny, sooner or later your boss is going to have to talk to us. Now run along like a nice boy and tell him we're here."

HE LOOKED at me as though he were surprised to see me. For a minute I thought he was going to tell me his name wasn't Benny.

"You coppers?"

"Junior G-men. Got our badges and fingerprint set this morning."

He sneered, "You're so cute."

I simpered, "You should see my soft-shoe routine."

Patsy was getting impatient. In a minute he'd start throwing his weight around.

He said, "We're going upstairs." It wasn't a question and it wasn't a threat. It was simply a statement. If I'd been the little man I'd have gotten out of the way. He didn't. He was about to whistle for pals.

I like long shots. Leaning forward, I whispered in a confidential tone as if I was talking to my barber, "Just tell Ed his wife sent us."

The effect was immediate. A dim light played about the man's eyes for a minute, and then he turned and started upstairs.

"Why didn't you say so?" He mumbled it back over his shoulder.

We followed him.

The inner sanctum was luxurious. It was thickly carpeted in bright blue and had paneled walls and indirect lighting. There were two couches, some plush chairs and a desk that should have been large enough for a vice-president of the First National Bank. Eddie Lane had furnished his home in good taste. I heard the door slam and looked around. Our little man had disappeared.

Patsy turned to me. "How did you know they were married?"

"I didn't." I grinned. "But I do now. Lane was never much of a man for the ladies, and the Williamson girl wasn't the type to have a school-girl crush on a gambler. If Glade wanted her followed there was a good chance it was serious. So I played a hunch. And this time it payed off."

A door behind the desk opened, and the thin man with the black necktie stepped into the room.

"Hello, Candy," Patsy said. "Where's Eddie?"

He ignored the question. "Blanche sent you?" he asked instead. "What does she want?"

"She said to talk to Eddie."

"Eddie's out of town," Candy said.

Patsy smiled. "Picked a strange time to take a powder, didn't he?"

"Depends on how you look at it."

Then Candy was silent. He was waiting for us to make a play, and I had a feeling it'd better be good. There was something wrong here, but I was taking too long to figure it.

Candy sat down on the desk in front of us. "Who told you Blanche and Eddie were married?"

Patsy was staring at a bronze bookend he'd picked up from the shelf in back of him. He didn't look up when he spoke. "She did. I'm working on a case for her. Something about some footprints outside her window"

"You're lying. Blanche didn't send you here." Candy said it entirely too quietly. "What's the gag, shamus?"

I had it. I could see what was wrong. Of course Hatz knew we were lying, because he knew the girl was dead. And he knew she was dead because either he killed her or he knew who had.

Patsy had hefted the bookend over into his right hand, and he had that belligerent look.

"It's no gag, Candy. I'm looking for some answers to some questions. Here's one, for example. If Eddie's really out of town, why aren't you with him?"

That did it. Candy grinned nastily and reached inside his coat. Patsy heaved the bookend. Now Patsy is no bigger than a Green Bay Packer, and I doubt that he can break a man's neck just by hitting him, but he can heave a bookend. It was a heavy bookend, and it clipped Candy on the shoulder hard enough to roll him off the desk. As he fell, one fist jabbed a buzzer while the other hand fumbled in his coat. He was clumsy about it. The gun dropped to the floor.

Patsy crossed the room and kicked viciously at the hand that was reaching for the gun. Doors opened all over the place. The little man tackled Patsy just below the knees and another tried to jump on his face as he fell. I felt like an innocent bystander.

Patsy was on his feet again, and as he pushed the little man at two others, I crossed the room to the telephone. When I picked it up, I heard something moving behind me. Then a strange thing happened. The bright blue carpet began turning black as it came rushing up to slap me in the face.

IT COULD have been a week later. The black dissolved slowly into grey, and in the middle of the grey a white light began to shine brighter and brighter until

it made my eyes sting. It was the ceiling. I was lying on my back on the floor, and someone was moving near me. I tried to move my head so I could see, and the little fellows began banging on my skull with hammers. I closed my eyes. When I opened them again, it was the blonde leaning over me. She was smiling, and her eyes were even bluer than they had been under the spotlight. It was a blue you could get lost in.

"You're going to be all right," she said. "He hit you pretty hard, but you'll be okay." The voice was even better than the eyes.

I grabbed the edge of the desk and hauled myself upright. Except for the girl, the room was empty.

"Where's Patsy?" I asked.

"Your friend's gone. I guess everybody's gone now." She smiled, and something about it made me smile too. "My name's Jean. I work here. When I came in you were asleep. And you were bleeding all over our best rug."

"I always get sleepy this time of night." I looked at the floor. There was a brown spot on the carpet where I had been lying. Beside it was a basin of water and some bandages.

"I sort of patched you up." She smiled again.

I reached out and patted her hand. "You're a sweet girl, Jean. Let me take you out of all this."

I found the telephone. This time I looked behind me before I picked it up. I got Burke at the city desk and gave him what I had on the girl's marriage. Then I called Patsy's office. He wasn't there. Some cop answered and I hung up quick. I was running through the phone book to find Glade's number when the blue carpet began getting black again. I got back down on the floor before it came up after me. The bright light got grey again and slowly faded into black.

* * *

Daylight was coming from a window somewhere. I was on a couch, and there was a pillow under my head. It was white like a pillow but it must have been made out of cast iron. I reached up and touched what should have been my head. It wasn't.

It was three sizes too large. In the shuffle I'd gotten somebody else's by mistake.

I sat up. The room was a pleasant one. It was neat and clean and the sun didn't have to fight its way through the windows. Wherever it was, it wasn't my room.

The girl came in from the kitchen, and then I didn't care too much where I was. I don't know which I looked at first, her or the tray of food.

She smiled. "How do you feel?"

"Hungry," I replied honestly. "How'd I get here?"

"I took you out of all that." Her eyes seemed to be laughing even when her mouth wasn't.

"Now it comes back to me. I was talking with some friends, and one of them got boisterous and slapped me with a chair. Then you came in and wrapped me in bandages. Was I a difficult patient?"

"You're a very nice patient."

I'm a funny guy. I like being talked to this way. I patted her shoulder. That was even better than patting her hand.

"Stick around, Jean. I keep getting better."

She pushed the tray at me. "Now stop talking and eat."

There seemed to be no reason for arguing. I wolfed down a couple of eggs and dunked a piece of toast. "You'd probably like to know who your patient is."

"Mr. O'Rourke already told me about you. He says you're crazy, Ken. Are you?"

"You know how rumors get around," I said. "When was Patsy here?"

"About an hour ago. He said to tell you he followed Hatz last night but lost him. He's looking for Mr. Glade now."

I laughed. "He'll lose him too."

"You had another visitor."

"The police?"

SHE NODDED. "Lieutenant Donovan. He was anxious to see you. I had a hard time getting rid of him."

"He'll be back." I snapped at a piece of bacon and stared at her. "Suppose you tell me what's really going on at the club. You knew Eddie Lane was married, didn't you?"

"No . . ."

"And that his wife was murdered last night."

"No, I didn't." The surprise on her face wouldn't have been good even for an amateur dramatics class.

"There must be something about me," I said. "Everybody thinks he has to lie to me."

"Ken!"

"You know that he skipped town." I paused for a moment. "Because he killed his wife."

"That's not true."

"How do you know it's not true? You didn't even know that she was killed or that he had gone."

She looked miserable, and I felt like a heel. But in my business you get used to the feeling.

"I lied to you, Ken. I knew he'd left town." She stared at the floor and chewed on the nail of her little finger. With her doing it, it was cute. I could have leaned over and kissed her, but I didn't. When I kissed this girl it would be because she wanted me to.

"All right," I said finally. "Why did he leave town?"

She thought that over a moment. "He had to leave, Ken. Candy was going to kill him. Someone paid him to do it. I overheard them talking one night. Candy said it could be made to look like an accident. He said there wouldn't be any trouble over it."

"Who was the other man, the one who paid Candy?"

"I didn't see him," she said, "They had the door almost closed, and he talked so quietly I could hardly hear him. I warned Eddie, and he left early yesterday morning."

"He could have left the club," I suggested, "and still hung around town long enough to murder his wife."

"No, Ken. He didn't kill her."

That was one thing about this murder. Everybody seemed to be pretty certain about who didn't kill the girl.

"Where's Eddie now, sweetheart?" I asked.

The doorbell saved her from cooking up a tall story about that one. She opened the door, and Donovan barged in with a couple of huskies. He looked at my bandaged head and sneered. He was unhappy about something or he'd have laughed out loud.

CHAPTER THREE

The Killer Is a Corpse

"WHO told you to print that story?" Donovan roared at me.

"Nobody told me not to." I tried to look innocent, but it was hard. "Well, what's the latest dope on the case, Lieutenant?"

Donovan sighed. "Look, I'll explain so a moron can understand." He hefted his bulk into a chair. "Glade killed the Williamson girl. The guys flat broke and he needed her dough. He was engaged to her, and he caught her running around with some other guy. He hired O'Rourke to follow her. He wasn't at home when she was killed. We found his cigarette in her room, and it was his gun that killed her."

"His gun?"

"She was shot with a .38. Glade owns a .38 revolver, but he says it was stolen from him. Now isn't that a coincidence! And then there were the footprints."

"Footprints?" I asked, as though I didn't know.

I searched my tray for something else to eat. There was nothing there but a paper napkin. I left it there.

"The killer left his prints, getting into the house. We haven't found the shoes yet, but they were size nine. Glade wears size nine."

"That's a nice way to convict a man," I said. "I wear nines myself."

"I'll check into that," he offered.

"There are some holes in your story, Lieutenant," I said. "Glade was never engaged to the girl. And the thing he hired Patsy to find out was whether she was already married. She was—to Eddie Lane."

"I know that. I read your lousy paper."

"But here's what you don't know," I went on. "Lane's bodyguard was hired to kill him. When we talked to Hatz last night he already knew the girl was dead. And he was awfully touchy about being asked questions. Round up Hatz and squeeze him a little. You'll find the story is not so simple."

"That may be a little difficult." Donovan was looking smug now. "Candy Hatz was killed this morning—on his way in to

Rodney Glade's apartment. Tough, huh?" I whistled.

Donovan continued, "He was shot with a .38 revolver, the same gun that killed Blanche Williamson. Any questions?"

"Just one. Where was the body found?"

"On the sidewalk in front of the building. Glade could have shot him from the living-room window."

"There's a stairs inside," I interrupted, "with a window at each landing. Anybody else could have shot him from one of those windows."

Donovan looked smug again. "But Hatz was on his way to see Glade when he was knocked over."

"How do you know that?"

"We found I. O. U.'s on the body—five thousand dollars worth—signed by Rodney Glade."

I had no answer for that. "What does the boy say for himself?"

"He isn't saying anything. He ran out. But we'll find him; and when we do, we'll hang him."

I shook my head. "I don't think Glade has nerve enough to crack his knuckles."

"Then what was he doing in the girl's room? What happened to his revolver? Why did he run away?" Donovan snapped the questions.

"If we knew the answers, your case would be solved. I only know that if I were going to hang a man, I wouldn't hang him with questions."

"No?"

"I'd hang him with answers."

Donovan grabbed his hat and headed for the door. The huskies trotted after him like a couple of hound dogs.

"Have you found the gun?" I yelled after him.

He stopped at the door. "When I find Glade, I'll find the gun."

Then he was gone.

THE GIRL watched the door slam, then turned to me. "That was nice of you, not telling them Eddie had left town."

"It was nice," I agreed. "But I don't know if it was smart or not. They'll find out by themselves, and when they do they'll be sore at me."

"They'll think he killed her, won't they, Ken?"

"They may get some such notion. He does get the money, you know. There's no limit to the things a guy'll do for money. I might have killed her myself if the dough were coming my way."

"No, Ken, you couldn't have done a thing like that. I know you couldn't." Something in the way she said it made me very pleased with myself for not having killed the girl.

"Look, baby," I said, "I've got to talk to Eddie. Where is he?"

"I don't know."

I got unpleasant again. "Like you didn't know his wife had been killed? And that he had skipped town?"

She blushed. "No, Ken, I really don't know. He has a place somewhere in northern Wisconsin. But he's the only one who knows where it is."

"Okay," I said. "I'll have to get to him my own way. One other thing, though. Have you told anyone about overhearing Candy make the deal to kill Lane?"

"No one but you."

"Good. See that you don't." I may have squeezed her arm a little harder than necessary. "That was a good breakfast. We may want to do it again sometime."

She gave me one of her very special smiles as she closed the door behind me. If there had been any good reason for doing it, I think I could have floated on air.

I found Patsy at his office. He had his feet and a bottle of bourbon up on the desk. I found paper cups and filled one with water. My head was banging like a cement mixer, and I didn't see how it could get much worse.

"It's a good thing you collected your dough in advance," I told Patsy. "Donovan has the bloodhounds on your boy Glade. And if he catches him, he'll hang him."

"You still think he killed her." Patsy's tongue was thick when he talked, and I noticed how much of the bottle was already gone.

"No," I replied. "The one thing I'm certain of now is that Glade didn't do it."

"Then who do you think did do it?"

"I don't know. Maybe Hatz was hired to do it, the same way he was supposed to kill Eddie Lane. Maybe Lane did it himself. Or maybe"—and here I paused

a minute to think—"maybe Williamson killed her."

"Her uncle?" Patsy shook his head. "It was an outside job. The footprints—remember?"

"Yeah." I remembered, none too happily. "The footprints."

Patsy seemed to be waking up. "I got to find Glade before Donovan's wolves get him."

"Why?" I asked. "He'd be safer in jail than anywhere else."

"What do you mean by that?"

"Simple enough. The kid's being framed. There's more evidence lying around this case than in a Charlie Chan movie. And all of it was planted. Someone stole his gun and shot the girl. The same someone hired Hatz to kill her husband. And when Hatz loused up the job, the same gun was used on him. Now, here's the point: The gun still hasn't been found."

"I don't get it," Patsy said.

"Glade is still on the loose, hiding out somewhere without a chance of setting up an alibi," I went on. "Whoever wanted Lane out of the way probably still does. Now, what could be sweeter than having him killed with the same gun that was used on Hatz and the girl, and leaving Glade to take the rap for three murders instead of two?"

Patsy wasn't making much sense of all this, because when I said, "I've got to reach Lane ahead of whoever has the .38," he didn't even ask how I intended to do it. I got my hat. When I left, Patsy was muttering something about there being an easier way to make a living.

I figured that wherever Lane was he must be reading the papers. He probably knew that his wife had been killed, but it was unlikely that he knew about Hatz or that it was Glade the police were looking for. My job was to let him know it was safe to come back and then see to it that I talked to him just as soon as he hit town. He could give me the lead I needed. Or, if he had killed the girl himself—well, it isn't smart to figure things too far ahead.

AT THE OFFICE, I worked up a story that I thought would convince the gambler. I dressed it up with pictures

from our files of Blanche Williamson, Hatz and Rodney Glade, and some new shots of the Williamson house and Glade's apartment building. I didn't mention the Cambray Club or Eddie Lane's disappearance. The old man liked the story. I even liked it myself.

I called Jean and told her to let me know the minute she heard anything from Eddie. Then I dug into our morgue. I checked the Williamson name through our back society pages and read everything I could find on Williamson Products in the finance and commerce sheets. By the time I finished it was late in the afternoon and I was hungry.

At Charlie's, I lined up a set of glasses and began knocking them down. I had some pretzels, too, because I really was hungry. The stuff I knew was running around in my head with the stuff I was guessing at. As time and the glasses passed by, everything got running pretty fast.

When I left, I couldn't feel the pain in my head any more. I couldn't feel anything. My feet, I suppose, were moving somewhere under me, and I seem to have gotten back to my hotel without knocking down very many people. I hit the bed and began to dream with my eyes wide open. I dreamed of footprints, thousands of footprints, coming from the road to the house, then from the house to the road, and then from the road to the house again, until it made no difference which they were coming from. Suddenly it seemed quite clear, although I couldn't make out exactly what it was that seemed so clear. Then all the lights everywhere went out.

The telephone went off like a fire alarm. My watch said two o'clock; it was light outside, so it must have been afternoon. Somehow I picked up the telephone without dropping it on my foot. It was Patsy. He had a pal in the Homicide Bureau who called in all the late returns and they had just gotten a flash on Glade. The boy had been seen leaving a West Madison Street rooming house. He had gotten a cab and headed downtown.

Patsy had a cab waiting by the time I got downstairs. I told the driver, "Cambray Club and fast."

"What do you think we're running after?" Patsy wanted to know.

"If we're lucky enough and fast enough we're going to stop a murder."

Patsy shrugged his shoulders, and I could tell he hadn't understood anything I'd said the day before.

"I'm betting that Lane is back in town and that he's at the Club now," I said. "I'm also betting that's where Glade is headed."

"Why should Glade want to kill Eddie Lane?"

"He doesn't. Even if he wanted to he wouldn't have nerve enough to do it. But somebody wants Lane dead. I think Glade will be pushed into things just in time to take the blame."

We jumped out of the cab before it had pulled to a stop and entered the club on the run. The inside was deserted except for a couple of scrubwomen, and no one tried to stop us on the stairs. We were halfway up when a single shot split the silence around us. We stopped for a moment, but there wasn't another sound.

Patsy looked at me and I shrugged. "Too late. That, I'm afraid, was the late Eddie Lane."

CHAPTER FOUR

The Great Murder Merger

WE WENT up the steps three at a time. The door to the office was locked like a bank vault. Patsy threw himself against it, and finally the lock gave. The room was dark and still as a tomb. I snapped on the lights. Everything seemed to be in order, except that the door behind Eddie Lane's desk was part way open.

We crossed the room to it. And there on the floor, wedged into the door, holding it open, was the body. It had fallen on its side as though it was tired and had lain down in a comfortable position to rest. A large red spot stained the lapel of the trim brown suit. It was not Eddie Lane.

Patsy bent over and rolled it onto its back. It was Rodney Glade, looking boyishly surprised and quite newly dead.

"Glade," Patsy said and then looked up at me. "How does this fit into your story?"

I whistled loud and long. "It doesn't. Somebody's trying to make a monkey out

of me. It wasn't supposed to happen this way at all."

Patsy stepped over the body and disappeared into the passageway behind the door. I began searching the room. Behind a chair on the opposite side of the room from where the body lay I found a cigarette case. It was silver and had been engraved in Old English letters—*R. G.* I had just picked it up when Donovan came through the door behind me followed by a mob of policemen. I pointed to the door behind the desk as if I was directing traffic.

"You don't have to hang him now, Donovan." I said. "It's Glade. And I don't have to know much about bullet wounds to know that he was shot with the same .38."

"And do you know who killed him?" he asked.

"No," I answered. "Suppose you tell me."

Donovan grinned. "All right, suppose I do. Eddie Lane found out Glade had murdered his wife and his bodyguard. He figured he was next. So he had his men find out where Glade was hiding and lure him down here to the club. Then he shot him."

"But first he borrowed the gun from Glade to shoot him with. It won't work, Donovan," I argued. "Lane's not even in town. He's at his hideout somewhere in Wisconsin. We've been trying to find him for twenty-four hours."

Eddie Lane was calm and dignified as two policemen pulled him through the door behind the desk. Patsy was right behind them with his gun aimed at the gambler's back. Each of them stepped over Glade's body as gingerly as though it were made of glass.

"He was on the stairs below," Patsy offered.

"Hello, Lane," Donovan said. "You're just in time to sign a confession."

Eddie Lane said nothing.

"You may as well let him get his lawyer," I said. "He won't say anything until he does."

"Want to change your story now, Branch?" Donovan laughed.

"No," I said. "Lane didn't kill the boy. He was just this minute on his way into the club. If he'd been five minutes earlier, he'd be stretched out in back of the desk

now instead of Glade. It wasn't Glade the killer was going for."

I handed Donovan the cigarette case.

"This was behind the chair on the other side of the room," I said.

"Glade dropped it there."

"Oh, no," I told him. "Glade was on his way into the room when he was shot. That case was planted there just like the cigarette in the girl's room. The killer was waiting for Eddie Lane. Glade was only supposed to be the fall guy. But Glade made the mistake of getting here early, and in the dark he looked just like Lane. The killer didn't have time to ask him for identification."

Two cops began searching the gambler.

"You won't find the gun on him," I told them. "He never carries one. And he's never even seen the .38 you're looking for. If you really want that gun I'll tell you where you can find it."

"This better be good," Donovan said.

"I'll wager it has already been hidden in Glade's apartment." I grabbed Patsy by the arm. "Give me your gun, quick."

Donovan was shouting some kind of warning, but I was already on my way out. Jean was not in her dressing room, and she was nowhere downstairs. She was gone. I called her apartment and Patsy's office and my office. She had left no word at any of them. There was no time to waste. If I didn't find the girl quick, she might get away to where I wouldn't be able to find her until it was too late. I remembered the breakfast and her blue eyes in the yellow spotlight. Then I thought of the tidy bundle the Williamson girl had made under the white sheet, and I shuddered.

Next I called the Williamson home. Anthony Williamson had left for his office early that morning and was not expected home until late in the evening. I despaired of really finding him at the office, but anything was worth a chance at this stage of the game.

A woman's voice answered, a pleasant voice, but coldly impersonal and business-like. "Yes, Mr. Williamson is in. He's been in the office all morning. . . . No, he hasn't been out today. . . . No, he can't talk to you now. He's making a long distance call and left orders not to be disturbed. If you want to see him, you'll

have to hurry. He has a board of directors' meeting at four. . . . Who shall I say called?"

I HUNG up abruptly. The closer I came to the answer the more confused things became. If the old man had been in his office all day I had nothing to worry about. Jean was in no real danger. But then I didn't have a case, and Donovan was right about the gambler after all. No, I knew that couldn't be. Everything else fitted too well. I didn't believe that Williamson was actually in his office, but I had to be certain.

I left the cab at the curb and crossed the lobby of the Metropolitan Building. The sleek, steel elevator lifted me too quickly to the thirty-ninth floor, reminding me unpleasantly that I'd had nothing to eat since the pretzels last night.

The outer offices of Williamson Products was a large, bright room with a mob of people and the racket of typewriters, telephones, buzzers and confusion. I glanced quickly around the room and spotted the waiting bench in front of the railing. There she sat, nervously chewing the tip of a pale blue glove. I crossed the room quickly and sat down beside her.

"What's the idea?" I growled. "Why don't you tell somebody when you're going to run off and play hide-and-seek by yourself?"

She put her hand on my arm, and we both just left it there. "I didn't have time to, Ken. He ran out of the club while the police were there. He took his car to some apartment a few blocks from his home and then he came here."

"Anthony Williamson?" I asked.

She nodded, and I knew my case was complete.

"Where is he now?" I asked.

"He went into a door down the hall. But I'm sure he's in his office now. I'm waiting to talk to him."

"That's dandy." I was angry, and I didn't try to hide it. "Just dandy. Everywhere we turn we find dead bodies, and you have to go off on a chase by yourself. What are you trying to do—get yourself added to the collection?"

"Oh, Ken. . ." She sighed, and her eyes got dreamy. If I'd had the time I'd have done something about it right then. But

the old boy was waiting in his office, and I had to see him in a hurry I grabbed her arm and pulled her with me, past the railing, through the maze of desks and filing cabinets, and up to the paneled door marked *Anthony Williamson—Private*. The secretary was away, and I pushed Jean into her desk. There was a dictaphone gadget next to the typewriter, and I flipped a button on it.

"Now, you sit right here," I told her. "And whatever happens, just sit still and listen. If you can write fast enough, take it all down."

Then I saw the letter, lying on top of a pile of incoming mail. It was addressed to Anthony Williamson and was from a New York law firm. My eye hit one paragraph:

Now that the legal technicality concerning policy control of your corporation has been so satisfactorily cleared up, the merger can be effected without further delay. Your control of shares in Williamson Products should guarantee your election to the board . . .

I tried the paneled door and was surprised to find it open. The old boy was seated comfortably at his desk, looking extremely refined and respectable. He raised his white head slowly and smiled, a soft, friendly smile, exactly as though he was expecting me. For a minute I was certain I had made a mistake.

"Have a chair, young man. I'll be with you in a moment." The voice was gentle and quiet.

Instead, I crossed the room and opened the small door at the side of the office. As I had expected, it opened onto the hall, and directly across from it was a stairway. He could easily have left his office for an hour or two at a time and returned without anyone knowing he had gone. I left the door wide open and returned to his desk.

"How's business, Pop?" I asked, tossing the letter to him. "Swung any good mergers lately?"

I wanted to shock him out of his composure, but he didn't bat an eyelash. It only took him a second to read the letter. Then he waved me into a chair.

"Yes. The business has been losing ground for several years," he explained. "This merger will enable us to recapitalize

and expand. It will put the business back on its feet."

"And make you richer by five or six million dollars," I added.

He shrugged his shoulders deprecatingly. This boy was certainly lousy with good breeding.

"But did it really take three murders to clear up the legal technicality concerning policy control?"

Without answering, he rose and crossed the room to the open door, as I knew he would do. When his back was to me I reached over and flipped the button of his dictaphone so Jean could get a load of this. A red light glowed from the panel. I shoved a calendar in front of it. The old boy closed the door, snapped the lock and returned to his seat again. He settled himself comfortably.

"Now." He smiled. "Suppose you tell me what you're talking about."

"I'm talking about that letter." I pointed to it. "When your brother was alive you had always quarreled over the



Anthony Williamson

policy of the business. As soon as he died, you gained temporary control and went ahead with your plans to move east into the big money. But meantime his daughter was growing up to inherit the business, and she didn't like your plans any better than her father had. So you had to kill her."

He smiled pleasantly and shook his head.

I SMILED right back at him. "Let me finish. Somehow, you got hold of Glade's gun and one of his cigarettes. Then you made sure he would be home

alone. You dressed for bed and waited for your niece. When you were certain she was asleep, you entered her room, unfastened the French doors, lit Glade's cigarette and left it to burn out on an ashtray. You shot the girl and hid in the hallway until the butler came in and found the body. Then you rushed in as though you had just been aroused from sleep. You telephoned Glade and the police.

"The boy was telling the truth. He had been home all evening. But you lied to the police about not being able to reach him. That killed the only alibi he had. He was a cinch to have it pinned on him. The burnt cigarette was just extra trimming."

"Aren't you forgetting the footprints?" Williamson chuckled. "Or don't you agree with the police theory that they were the footprints of the murderer?"

"The killer made them," I agreed. "That threw us all off the track. But it's really quite simple. You made them yourself. After the butler had gone out and you were waiting for the police, you went back into the girl's room, stepped off the balcony, walked out to the road, then turned around and walked back. To anyone looking at the footprints, it would of course seem that they had been made by someone first coming in to the house and then leaving it. You had plenty of time to change shoes before the police arrived."

He chuckled again. "And the gangster? Did I kill him too?"

"Candy Hatz got to be more trouble to you than he was worth. When you learned that Blanche was married to Eddie Lane, you knew he would claim control of the business. So you hired Candy to do away with him. But Candy muffed the job, and he began to get scared. He probably wanted to leave town and made the mistake of threatening you for more money. You were afraid he'd blow up completely and start talking."

"He was a very stupid man," the old boy agreed, nodding.

"So stupid that his murder was simple," I added. "It was about an hour after the police left that Hatz called. You took a chance that they had finished questioning Glade and had left him there, so you told Hatz to meet you at Glade's apartment. You shot him from a window on the stairs,

planted Glade's I. O. U.'s and got back into your own house without being noticed by anyone."

The old man wasn't chuckling any more, but he was still game. He grinned weakly. "And now I suppose you're going to tell me how I killed Eddie Lane too."

That gave me the tip, and I decided to play my cards differently. I said, as simply as I could, "Now I'm going to tell you how you bungled the whole deal. Glade heard the shots and was afraid he'd be suspected of killing Hatz. He wanted help, and he came to see you. You figured it would be a good idea to keep him out of jail until he could take the rap for all three murders. Somehow, you got his cigarette case away from him and sent him off to hide out in a west side rooming house where you could reach him when you wanted him.

"This morning, when you heard Lane had returned, you came to your office and gave your secretary that story about long-distance telephone calls and board meetings so you wouldn't be disturbed but would still have an air-tight alibi. Then you left by that door and went down the back stairs. You called Rodney Glade from the Cambray Club and instructed him to meet you there as soon as possible. But when you got upstairs to Eddie's office, he wasn't there. You planted Glade's cigarette case and hid to wait for the gambler to show up. It was dark in the room, and when the rear door opened and your man came in, you shot him. You got out plenty fast, because Patsy and I broke into the office only a few minutes after the shot was fired. You took a cab to Glade's place, planted the gun somewhere in his apartment and got back to your office without your secretary knowing you had ever left."

The old boy wasn't broken yet. He said very softly, "You tell an interesting story, Mr. Branch, and extremely accurate—except for the I. O. U.'s, of course. I didn't put them in Hatz' pocket. He just happened to have them with him. That was simply a stroke of luck. But the weak part of your story is that you have no proof, and you know as well as I do that the police won't believe it without proof. And if you try to print it, I'll sue your paper for all it's worth."

I grinned. "You haven't heard the interesting part yet. Hiding the gun in Glade's apartment was a serious mistake. Because, you see, it was darker in that office than you think. It wasn't Eddie Lane you shot. It was your fall guy, Rodney Glade. The police captured Lane right after the killing, so they will know that he wouldn't have had time to hide the gun in Glade's apartment."

Anthony Williamson's face went as white as his hair. This was the first he knew that he had killed the wrong man. He lost his composure. He snarled when he spoke. "You're lying."

I pointed to the telephone. "Just ask for the Police Department. They'll tell you. And as for evidence, you were seen leaving the club. A girl followed you here. She's outside now, listening to every word of this, taking it down for the police to read."

Immediately, I wished I had said something else. The old boy had the largest gun I've ever seen, pointed right in my face. Looking down the barrel it seemed more like a cannon. I had an unpleasant feeling that this would all be over too quickly. Patsy's gun felt heavy in my pocket and I cursed myself for being so stupid. I thought of Jean and prayed she would have sense enough to clear out.

I heard the door behind me click open,

THE END

and Patsy came charging into the room like a fullback going through a hole in left tackle. I had half risen from my chair and plunged my hand into my pocket when the old boys' gun went off and a locomotive crashed into my left shoulder. The chair spun under me and I seemed to bang against the desk, the table, a chair and the wall as I fell. Then everything went black.

WHEN I came to, I was in a hospital bed and Patsy was grinning down at me. Jean was standing beside him. All in all it looked pretty good to me after the black.

"The gun was in Glade's apartment like you said," Patsy said. "We took the old man without shooting him up. And your paper has the story, exclusive. You'll probably get a raise."

I wasn't listening. The girl was smiling like that again, and this time I knew she wanted me to kiss her. Someone had a brick building parked on my left shoulder, but my right arm was free. I reached up and pulled her to me. Her lips were soft as they met mine. Then, suddenly, I tightened my arm about her shoulders and let out a loud curse. For the first time in this case, I was really sore. I was alive; I'd gotten a raise; I had the girl; and now everything was getting black again.



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B-L-O-N-D-E SPELLS TROUBLE!

"He was still in a drunken stupor," she said. "I dragged him to the middle of the floor, shot him and phoned the police."



By
**ANN
LIGHTLEY**

She was right out of a dream, blonde and lovely, with the softest lips a man ever kissed. . . . And she was all Joe Draga's —if he'd do just one little favor for her: Murder!

JOE DRAGA swallowed a lungful of dusty air and wiped the sweat from his broad forehead with a hairy forearm while he read the road sign. A faded blue shirt, open to the waist, clung damply to his ribs, and his eyeballs ached from the burning glare of the gravel. The sign said: Alderwood—45 Miles. He started walking again. He had heard it was a

good district for fruit pickers. For two weeks now he had been hiking cross-country without making a dime. And now ninety cents stood between him and a vagrancy rap.

He heard a motor purring behind him, swung his stocky body around, jerked a thumb. His black eyes narrowed against the flash of chromium as a sky-blue con-

vertible rolled up beside him. The door swung open. Joe grabbed it and slid in beside the driver. It was a woman. He muttered his thanks and stared straight ahead. Joe had lost interest in dames after one of them had let him down two years ago.

When the car was moving again she said in a low, husky voice, "How far are you going?"

Joe glanced at her. A pink feather hat dipped forward on her tawny blonde upswept hair, and her white dress was draped to accent a figure that needed no emphasizing. Her eyes were dove-grey beneath heavy lids, and her lips were full. Joe's eyes went back to the road. "Alderwood," he said briefly.

He wondered why she'd picked him up. Most dames driving alone were skittish about guys hitching rides, and he knew he looked like a tramp with his day-old stubble and dust-grimed clothes.

"Looking for work?" she asked.

He nodded. "Fruit picking." He flattened his shoulders against the leather upholstery, conscious of her interested scrutiny.

"I'm Mrs. Palmer," she told him. "My husband and I live ten miles the other side of Alderwood." She paused, then went on, "We're looking for a man to do odd jobs around the place. If you're interested . . ." She let it rest there.

Joe stared out at passing pastures where cows sheltered beneath the trees from the blazing noon sun. There was something screwy about this deal, he thought. She could have her pick of the guys in Alderwood for the price of an ad in the local sheet. Why proposition a complete stranger?

After a short pause she went on, "We'll pay twenty-five a week and board."

He squinted sideways at her. "Help hard to get around here?"

"Well, the local farmers get the choice of local men," she explained patiently. "Those left over don't seem to care for steady employment. We've had experience with them."

Joe forked his fingers through black hair and thought of the ninety cents in his pocket. Mrs. Palmer's explanation made sense. And if he didn't like the job he could always quit.

"It's a deal," he said. "Name's Joe Draga."

Her smile was sudden, startling. "Fine, Joe," she said. "I know we'll get along."

Joe grinned lopsidedly.

In Alderwood she parked in front of the post office, took a twenty-dollar bill from a crocodile leather bag and handed it to him. "Better get some work clothes." She made it sound like a business transaction.

Joe nodded. He needed some shirts, a razor and a few things. "Take it off my first pay," he said.

She pushed open the door. "I'll be back in twenty minutes."

Joe got back first. He stuffed his bundles on the rear shelf and sat waiting. He still had his ninety cents and five of the twenty dollars left. Might need something else before payday. Mrs. Palmer returned a few minutes later.

THE HOUSE was white, Colonial style, set on rolling tree-covered land a mile back from the highway. Mrs. Palmer drove along the drive to the rear garage. Joe noticed a thin, sandy-haired man in a yellow sport shirt sprawled in a garden chair on the shaded patio. He sat up when they walked back to the house.

"Alvin, this is Joe Draga," Mrs. Palmer said. "He's going to work for us. Joe—my husband."

Surprise flickered over Palmer's pale, weak-looking face. "Oh?" he said, then added quickly, "Well, we need someone husky around." His handshake was limp and clammy, but his grin was friendly.

"Show him the cottage, Alvin," Mrs. Palmer said. "He can start work after lunch." She turned and sauntered into the house.

The cottage was just beyond the garage, almost hidden by flowering trees. Joe followed Palmer toward it.

"You from Alderwood?" Palmer queried.

Joe shook his head. "Been following the fruit crops the last three months." He glanced at Palmer's weak profile. "Have trouble finding help?"

"No-o, not exactly," Palmer replied. "Our last handyman left a month ago—drank himself out of the job. We haven't bothered looking around since."

Joe wondered about that. It didn't tie in with what Mrs. Palmer had told him, nor her urgency in selling him the job.

The cottage was neatly furnished, all white paint and spotless. Joe's dark eyes brightened with pleasure when he saw the shower.

"Mrs. Gibbs, the housekeeper, will fix you up with bedding and things," Palmer told him. "She'll give you meals over at the house. Did Audrey—Mrs. Palmer—arrange about wages?"

Joe nodded. "What do you want done first?"

Palmer gave some instructions. "Better take a look around the place," he wound up. "Then make a schedule to suit yourself."

* * *

Joe found plenty to keep him going. He didn't see Mrs. Palmer again until the next afternoon. He was clipping the hedge along the drive when she approached him, dressed for going out.

"Keep this in the cottage, Joe," she said. "I'll feel better knowing you have it." She extended a .32 automatic, held squeamishly by the barrel between the tips of gloved fingers. "My husband is frequently away on business and we are quite a distance from town."

He shot a sharp glance at her. "You're taking a big chance giving me a gun, Mrs. Palmer," he said softly. "You don't know me."

She said, smiling, "I think I do."

Maybe he should have felt flattered, but he didn't. He took the automatic, slipped out the clip. It was full. "Had trouble with prowlers around here?" he asked bluntly.

"There's always a first time," she told him sharply.

Joe put the gun in his hip pocket and resumed work on the hedge.

She stood looking at him, and Joe felt uncomfortable. He began whistling tunelessly through his teeth until she turned and walked away. He watched her disappear into the garage, thinking what a dishful she was, and discovered his pulse was beating faster. After she had driven away in the blue convertible he took the gun to the cottage, stowed it under his shirts in the bureau drawer.

SHE hadn't lied about her husband's business trips, anyway. Next morning Palmer told Joe he'd be away overnight and drove off in the Cadillac.

By eleven o'clock, stripped to the waist, Joe was mowing the lawn along the side of the house. The sun was hot on his shoulder blades and he was sweating profusely. He glimpsed Mrs. Palmer studying him from the garden swing on the patio. He bent to the mower again, glanced up when she called him. She beckoned him over.

She looked cool and trim in white tennis shorts and low-necked blouse. "Take a break, Joe, and cool off," she said, smiling. She took a bottle of beer from an ice bucket on a low table. "Try this."

Joe moistened dry lips. "Thanks," he said.

She took an opener from the table. "I'll do it," he said and reached out to take the opener. But she dropped it, set down the beer and swayed closer to him. Joe's blood pounded, reading the invitation in the languorous grey eyes. Her arms came up around his neck, drew his head down to hers, and her perfume filled his nostrils. He knew he had walked blindly into a neat little trap. Okay, he decided, he'd play along. He pulled her to him roughly, and under his own her lips were hot and eager. Their touch put a torch to his blood, but his brain was alert, wary. He broke away, picked up the opener and bottle and pried off the cap. He was puzzled. Just what lay behind this phony setup, he couldn't figure.

He let the cold beer run down his throat, wiped his mouth with the back of his hand and waited for her to speak.

She sank back slowly into the swing. "I—I couldn't help it, Joe," she murmured. "You're so—so different."

Joe hid a grin. She'd have to do better than that. A fatal charm for women wasn't one of his strong points, he was damn sure. "You mean, you'd trade Palmer for me," he said, not meaning it.

She didn't speak for a few moments. Then, "We've been married five years," she said in a low voice, "but I—I just can't go on any longer."

Joe quit thinking it was funny. He said roughly, "Hell, you've got everything you want here. Takes money to run a joint

like this. Big house, garden, Cadillac."

She looked up at him, her eyes sultry. "It could be heaven, Joe—with the right person. But . . ." She shrugged, went on softly, "I've always been used to having money, but then the war came and Dad lost everything. I married Alvin because he had money, but I didn't love him, and now, well, I know it was a mistake."

Joe studied her a moment. Maybe he'd had her wrong. She seemed frank enough. He drained the bottle and set it on the table. "I've no money," he said abruptly.

She caught his hand, pulled him onto the swing. "You're what I need, Joe," she murmured. "I've known that since first meeting you. I . . ." She stopped short, then said quickly, "Joe, you aren't—there isn't a girl somewhere . . . ?"

"Not until now," he muttered. Her lips were close, and he kissed them thoroughly. Afterwards, he asked, "Why don't you get a divorce, leave him?"

She shook her head. "He wouldn't let me."

Joe shrugged helplessly. "Even if he did," he said, "a gal like you costs money. I don't make that kind."

Her hair was silky against his bare shoulder. "Joe," she whispered, "If anything happened to Alvin—an accident or something—I'd get all his money." Her voice was almost a caress. "There'd be nothing to keep us apart. Oh, Joe . . ."

Joe got it then. He thrust her from him, jerked to his feet. "So that's it," he said softly. "Had it all worked out neatly. A dose of romance and I'd be punchy enough to fall for your rotten scheme." His voice hardened. "You picked wrong, sister. I don't want any part of it. I'll finish the week to pay for the duds, then I'm hitting the road again."

She rose stiffly, her face white. "Joe, you—you don't understand. . . ."

"Don't I?" he said over a mocking grin, and walked away.

SHE kept out of his way the rest of the day. Palmer returned the following afternoon, and at eight o'clock that evening Joe saw them drive away, dressed for a party. He took his time over his chores. Even after sundown the air was hot and still. He worked late, had a shower and turned in. But the room was like

an oven. After twisting restlessly on the cot for an hour, he got up, dressed and went outside. It was cooler in the garden. He lay on the lawn swing.

He woke when headlights swung into the driveway and the car rolled past into the garage. The doors rolled down and a moment later Audrey Palmer came out through the side door, closed it and hurried toward the house. Joe frowned. Palmer must have stayed in town. He got up and started for the cottage. Passing the garage he heard a motor purring. Joe didn't waste time. He ran to the side door, dashed inside. He yanked open the car door and switched off the ignition. Palmer was huddled on the seat, smelling like a whisky vat. Joe shook his arm but the guy was out cold.

Fury needling through him, Joe lugged Palmer outside and into the house, dumped him on a lounge, then ran upstairs. A streak of light showed beneath one of the doors. Grasping the knob, Joe burst into the room.

Seated before the vanity, Audrey Palmer jerked around to face him. A trio of orchids wilted on the low-cut bosom of her green evening gown.

A pulse throbbed in Joe's temple. "So you tried to kill Palmer yourself," he snarled.

She stared at him a moment, then rose and came unsteadily toward him, smiling rapidly. "Alvin's sleep, drunk," she murmured thickly. "Wanna hear you say you love me, Joe." Her hands slid up his arms.

Joe pushed her away in disgust and strode out of the room.

He used cold water on Palmer until the man's bloodshot eyes fluttered open. Joe helped him to a sitting position.

"You've been lucky, Palmer," Joe told him. "Next time your wife drives the car—see she stays sober—"

Palmer stared blankly at him. "You're crazy, Joe," he mumbled. "Audrey never took a drink in her life."

Joe stood a moment, thinking. So he'd been right the first time. She'd deliberately tried to kill her husband. What the hell. . . . This was no place for him. But before he quit he'd let her know he was wise to her trick.

Palmer was fading again. Joe slapped

his face with the wet towel until he blinked owlishly.

"Look, Palmer," Joe said. "Your wife tried to kill you tonight. Left you asleep in the car with the engine running, then slipped out and closed the doors. Understand? You dope . . . she wants you dead!"

"Sure. Wants my money," Palmer said thickly. "I'll fix her in the morning. You're a good guy, Joe." His eyes closed and he began to snore. Joe made him comfortable, then went back to Audrey Palmer's room.

She had changed into a filmy black negligee and her blonde hair was trailing on her shoulders. She tried the loose smile again, but Joe saw a wary look in her half-closed eyes.

"Never mind the act," he snapped. "Palmer just told me you never take a drink. You're just plumb rotten. First, you try to ring me in as the fall guy. When that failed you decided the accidental death gag would work. Just because you want all of the poor guy's dough. Why, you . . ."

She started to talk then, and fury wiped all the beauty from her face. Some of the things she called Joe he hadn't heard before, even in logging camps.

When she ran out of breath he told her, "I'm going down with Anderson's milk truck in the morning. I'm seeing the sheriff in Alderwood and telling him just what's been happening here, so you won't try it again." He grinned crookedly. "And here's something to make you sleep good. I just told Palmer about the garage. Sure, he's drunk, but he'll remember it in the morning. He's too decent to be crossed up by a damned tramp like you."

Breast heaving, hate in her eyes, Mrs. Palmer screamed a name at him, snatched a brass figurine from a stand and rushed at Joe. He threw up his right hand. The statuette caught him on the wrist and he felt agonizing pain shoot up his arm. He pushed her away with his left hand and walked out of the room.

BACK at the cottage, Joe bound a handkerchief around his wrist. It was swelling already, felt as if it was broken. He lay on the cot and tried to sleep, but the crazy turmoil of his thoughts cou-

pled with the agony knifing through his arm made it useless.

At six o'clock he got up, showered, shaved clumsily with his left hand and dressed. Luckily the housekeeper had laundered his old blue shirt. He left the stuff he'd bought in Alderwood in the bureau drawer, transferred a five-dollar bill and ninety cents in change to his left pocket and started down the drive.

On the highway, he waited until the milk truck came along. They reached town just after seven. The driver parked in front of a coffee shop on the outskirts. Joe's wrist throbbed constantly now with a dull intensity. A cup of coffee first, then he'd talk with the sheriff. After that, a doctor. He followed the truck driver inside. A brawny, apple-cheeked young fellow in soiled khaki pants, talking to the dark-skinned proprietor at the cash register, eyed Joe keenly as he walked to the counter. Joe had a feeling it was more than casual interest.

When the waitress brought his coffee "Here's a fellah wants the sheriff's office. "Hey, Hank," the girl called. "Here's a fellah wants the sheriff's office." She jerked a thumb at Joe.

The apple-cheeked youth walked down to where Joe was sitting. "I'm Hank Farrell, Sheriff Wiley's deputy," he said. "I'll take you there, bud."

Joe nodded. "Soon as I drink this java."

"Okay," Hank said. He sat on the stool beside Joe.

His coffee finished, Joe paid his check and Hank followed him out. On the way up the main street, Hank asked Joe his name and what he intended doing in town. He seemed like a pleasant guy.

The sheriff's office was a one-story stone structure. An elderly, thin-faced man was just putting down the telephone receiver when they entered. He had a scrawny neck with a prominent Adam's apple that kept bobbing up and down without any apparent reason.

"Fellow wants to see you, Sheriff," Hank said. "His name is—*Joe Draga*."

Joe wondered at the emphasis on his name, and it disturbed him to see a sudden gleam in the sheriff's eyes.

"That's nice," the sheriff said pleasantly. "Just been phoning about you."

"What do you mean?" Joe said.

Sheriff Wiley stood up. He wasn't as tall as his deputy, but he was wiry. "Phoning orders, son, to have you arrested. For murder."

Joe's eyes widened. It was a lousy joke. "Quit kidding, Sheriff." But somehow, he didn't think the guy was kidding. "I've come to talk to you about an attempted murder."

"You're under arrest, son," the sheriff said softly, "for the murder of Alvin Palmer."

Joe fought against a sudden coldness inside him. "Wait a minute," he said. "Palmer was alive last time I saw him, about two o'clock this morning. In fact, he was dead drunk."

The sheriff shook his head. "Mrs. Palmer phoned about twenty minutes ago," he said. "Claims you got fresh with her last night. Like you say, Palmer was too drunk to know what was going on, but this morning you went in the house again and, scared, she managed to wake her husband. You and him argued. Then you pulled a gun, shot him and beat it. I had Hank and my other deputy out looking for you while I was waiting for the doc to show up."

Joe felt like a trapped animal. And he'd thought he was a wise guy. Instead, the Palmer dame had done just what she'd started out to do. Use him for a fall guy. He got the whole picture. Knowing he was leaving this morning early, she'd watched him go, then slipped out and got the gun from the bureau drawer, shot her husband while he slept, and nicely framed Joe for the killing. They'd take her word against the word of a hired man, a road pickup. And she'd make sure his fingerprints were still on the gun.

Joe laughed bitterly. "Dames have a queer way of getting what they want,"

he said softly. "And they don't care who pays."

"Guess that's true, son," Sheriff Wiley agreed. "Well, guess we'll lock you up while I run out there with the doc. Take him in, Hank."

"Wait, Sheriff," Joe pleaded. "How about hearing my story. I didn't kill Palmer"—a sudden thought gave him hope—"and if you'll listen to me, I'll prove it."

"The judge is paid to listen to that," Sheriff Wiley told him. "What's wrong with your wrist?"

"That's part of the story," Joe said. "It's broken, anyhow. Look, Sheriff, you gotta listen now or it will be too late for me to prove I'm innocent."

"Umm." The sheriff touched his wrist. "We'll have the doc look at that before we start out. A few more minutes won't hurt Palmer. You can talk while we wait for the doc. Better go see what's keeping him, Hank."

The deputy went out and Wiley sat down again. "Now, talk fast, son."

He listened while Joe hurriedly recounted all that had happened since Mrs. Palmer picked him up. "I warned her I was coming to you with the whole story this morning," Joe finished. "That's when she broke my wrist with a brass figurine."

Wiley said, "Tall story, son, to ask a judge and jury to believe."

"I know," Joe admitted. "But . . ." He talked earnestly for a few minutes longer. He concluded anxiously, "Will you do it, Sheriff? If it doesn't work"—he shrugged—"I can't get away."

"That's right, son," Sheriff Wiley agreed. "You can't get away. Well, guess it won't hurt taking you along for the ride."

Joe found a chair and sat down. His knees felt wobbly, and the pain in his wrist was getting worse. He lit a ciga-

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rette and smoked in silence until Hank came back with the doctor.

A quiet little chap with a preoccupied manner, the doctor bandaged and splinted Joe's wrist with a brief confirmation that it was broken. Then they started away in the sheriff's car.

SHERIFF WILEY stopped the car a short distance from the Palmer house. "Go ahead, Hank," he said. "Make sure no one sees you from the house. When you see Draga go in, wait for me. I'll be close behind him."

Hugging the hedge, Hank made his way toward the rear of the grounds. Five minutes later the sheriff nudged Joe. "Okay, son, and no tricks. Hank and me both shoot damn good."

Joe grinned wryly. "Thanks for the chance, Sheriff," he muttered. Walking down the driveway, a fierce pounding seemed to jerk his whole body.

He entered the house by the front door, paused in the hallway and glanced into the library. His heart skipped a beat. Mrs. Palmer was standing in the center of the room, her hands nervously tugging at a lacy handkerchief.

Joe waited for one, maybe two minutes, then stepped inside, leaving the door slightly open.

"Audrey," he said quietly.

She half turned, saw him, and her face went suddenly stiff with fear. The handkerchief fluttered from her hands to the rug. "Joe . . . you . . ."

"Yeah, me," he said and forced a grin. It wasn't easy, remembering how she had deliberately framed him for murder. "You win, honey. I had to come back. I couldn't put you out of my mind."

Panic filled her grey eyes, but she made no effort to resist him when he pulled her roughly to him with his left arm and kissed her. "I'll go through with your plan, honey," he murmured. "I can't leave you."

She broke from his arm then and stepped back. "You fool," she laughed. "I don't need you now."

"What do you mean?" Joe looked puzzled. "He doesn't suspect anything, does he?"

She laughed harshly. "He's dead, and

you, you damn fool, are wanted by the police for his murder."

"But, I don't understand," Joe stammered. "He was alive last night after you tried to kill him in the garage. Why, I talked to him before I came up to your room."

"You shouldn't have interfered with that setup, Joe," she mocked him. "It was perfect. Now you're a hunted killer. I didn't need you after all, Joe."

"I still don't know what you're talking about," Joe insisted.

"I watched you leave this morning," she told him exultantly. "It only took a few minutes to get the gun—with your fingerprints on it. Alvin gave no trouble. He was still in a drunken stupor. I dragged him to the middle of the floor, shot him and phoned the police. But I told them you did it after an argument with Alvin. And no one is going to believe any story you might tell. The sheriff is on his way here now. He'll be tickled to find you've saved him the trouble of looking for—"

"The sheriff is already here, ma'am." Sheriff Wiley stepped into the room, followed by Hank. "Well, that let's you out, son."

Mrs. Palmer spun around, uttered a strangled cry.

"I'm arresting you, Mrs. Palmer," the sheriff went on grimly, "for murder."

Her face livid, the woman whirled on Joe. He felt her nails burn down the side of his cheek.

The sheriff moved forward and gripped her arm. All the fight seemed to die out of her then, and the sheriff turned her over to Hank, beckoned him to take her outside. He said, "We'll have the doc fix up your arm good, son, soon as we get back."

"Thanks again, Sheriff, for giving me the chance," Joe said.

The sheriff chuckled. "Son, that wrist gave you the chance," he said dryly. "I didn't figure you'd done any shooting with that hand soon as I saw it."

"Yeah," Joe said slowly, then grinned. "Yeah. She forgot that the fingerprints on the gun would have to be left-handed. Say, Sheriff, she wasn't so smart, after all."

YOU CAN'T GET AWAY WITH MURDER!



By NELSON and GEER

DRAMA OF DEATH

The first act of Mr. Marion Larner's drama of death was staged on the night of his 15th anniversary. With his wife beside him in their green sedan he drove out of Dill City, Okla. Pulling off on the soft shoulder—grazing a slash pine in his excitement—he lured Mrs. Larner from the car, struck her on the back of the head with the hammer from the tool kit, propped her in the front seat, drove on a mile farther where he ran the car into a culvert, smashed the windshield with the hammer, flung it in a high arc toward the morass flanking the road, and waited.

Mr. Larner's second act was equally well plotted and acted: unconsciousness when passing motorists found them, grief over his wife's death, a tearful account of having been blinded by an approaching car. But while he was silently applauding himself—and looking forward to the third act—Sheriff Oscar Doran picked up an un-



tures were on the back of the dead woman's skull where auto injuries seldom occur.

At the scene of the accident he noted the absence of skidmarks, discovered the empty hammer pocket in the tool kit, found a fresh scratch on the car body to which bits of bark adhered—and sensed the possibility of a murder whodunit. Retracing Larner's route, he came to fresh tire tracks on the soft shoulder beside a slash pine bearing a graze mark flanked with green paint. Behind it lay a lady's bloodstained glove.

Searchers combed the area and the accident scene for the murder weapon that would clinch the case, but without result. It began to look

as though it were at the bottom of the morass and Mr. Larner's drama would proceed as plotted. But suddenly a boy pointed high up in the crotch of a dead limb was a hammer. Five long hairs adhered to its bloodstained head. Both were Mrs. Larner's. A little digging produced the motive—another woman. Confronted with the evidence, Larner confessed, pleaded guilty, and instead of going off to live happily ever after with the other woman, the third act curtain saw him starting a life term.



I HATE TO TELL HIS WIDOW!

From headquarters to precinct, from station house to patrol car, the call went out . . . electrifying the air with the message that heats every cop's blood to killing fury: "Cop-Killer Wanted!"

CHAPTER ONE

Cop-Killer on the Loose!

JOE RAGAN was drinking his ten o'clock coffee when Al Brooks came in and gave him the news. "Ollie's dead," he said quietly. "Ollie Burns. Shot."

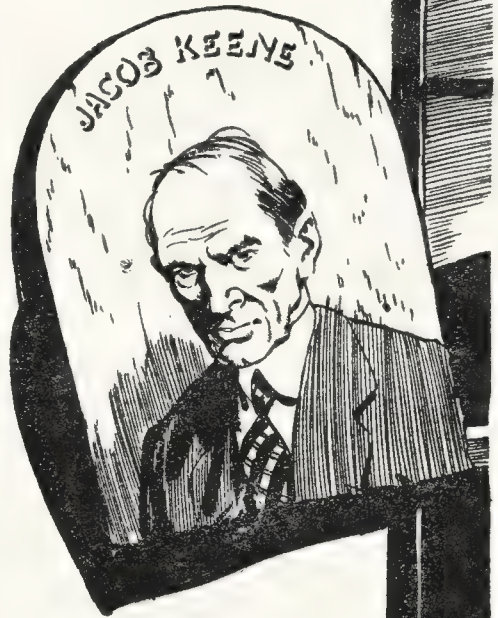
Ragan said nothing.

"He was shot twice," Al told him. "Right through the heart. The gun was close enough to leave powder burns on his coat."

Ragan just sat there holding his cup in both hands. It was late and he was tired, and this information left him stunned and unbelieving. Ollie Burns was his oldest friend on the force. Ollie had helped break him in when he first joined up after the war. Ollie had been a good cop, a conscientious man who had a name for thoughtfulness and consideration. He never went in for rough stuff, knowing the tax payers paid his salary, and understanding he was a public servant. He treated people with consideration and not as if they were avowed enemies.

"Where did they find him?" he said at last. "How did it happen?"

"That's the joker—we don't know. He was found on a phoned-in tip, lying in the weeds on the edge of the big vacant area at the end of Dunsmuir. What he was doing out there in the dark is more than I can guess, but the doc figures he'd been dead nearly an hour, maybe a shade



By

LOUIS

L'AMOUR



Smashing
Crime-Detective
Novel

Slowly the figure on the fire escape edged closer. . . . Would the cops never come. . . ?

less, when we found him." Brooks hesitated. "They think it was a woman. He smelled of perfume, and there was lipstick on his cheek and collar."

"Nuts!" Ragan got up abruptly. "Not Ollie. He was too much in love with his wife. He never stepped out or played around. I knew the guy too well."

"Well," Brooks said, "don't blame me. You could be right. Anyway, it ain't my idea. It's just what Stigler said."

"Where's Mary? Has she been told?" Ragan thought of that first, for thorough as Mark Stigler was, he was scarcely the type to break bad news to anyone.

"Uh-huh, Mark told her. She's home now, and your girl, Angie Faherty, is with her. They were to meet Ollie at the show at nine, and when he didn't show up Mary got worried, so they went home. It seems he was anxious to see this show with Mary, anyway, and they had planned to go together. She called the station when he wasn't at home, and a couple of minutes after she rang off this call came in telling us there was a body lying out there in the dark."

"Who called in?"

"Nobody knows. The guy said he didn't want to get mixed up in anything and hung up."

"Seems odd, anybody seeing that body so soon," Ragan said. "Nobody ever goes near that place at night, and only recently has anybody been around it by day. They're building an apartment house there now."

STIGLER was at his desk when Ragan walked in, and he looked up, unexpected sympathy in his eyes. "I was going to call you," he said, leaning back in his chair. "Do you want this case?"

"You know I do. Ollie was the best friend I had in the world. And you can forget that woman angle. That won't go for Ollie Burns. He was so much in love with Mary that it stuck out all over him, and he wasn't the type to play around. If anything, he was overly conscientious."

"Well, every man to his own view." Stigler tapped with his pencil. "You aren't a Homicide man, Joe, but I'm going to let you loose on this case. It's the first cop killing we've had in over a year, and we want to get the killer, whoever it

is. I want this case busted quick, and I want evidence no smart defense lawyer can break or twist. You understand?"

"Will I work with the Squad?" Ragan asked.

Stigler shook his head. "No, you're on your own. You've got a fresh viewpoint, and you knew more about Ollie than any of us. You can get all the help from us you want, and we'll be working on it too, but you go your own way."

Joe Ragan nodded with satisfaction. This was just the way he wanted it, but it was the last thing he had expected from Mark Stigler. Stigler was a smart Homicide man but a stickler for the rule book, and turning a man loose to work on his own like this was unheard of for him.

"Mark, did Ollie ever say anything to you about any case he was working on? I mean, in his spare time?"

"No, not a word." Stigler tapped with his pencil. "On his own time? I didn't know that ever happened around here. You mean he actually got out on his own time and worked on cases?"

"Sure. He was a guy who hated loose ends or things left around. Ask Mary some time. The guy would put every tool in its place, put every magazine back in the rack, every book on the shelf. It wasn't a phobia or anything, just that he liked to see things neat. And I know he's had some bug in his bonnet for months now, but what it was I don't know."

"That's a thought," Stigler agreed. "Maybe he got too close to the right answer for somebody's comfort and they knocked him off." He stoked his pipe, then leaned forward to strike a match. "You're right about him being overly conscientious. I remember that Towne suicide, about a year ago. He was always needling me to see if I had anything new on it. Hell, there wasn't anything new. The deal was open and shut. Alice Towne killed herself and there was no other way it could have happened. But it seems Ollie knew her, and it upset him."

"He was like that." Ragan got up. "What have you got so far?"

"Nothing. We haven't found the gun. Ollie's own gun was still in his holster. He was in civilian clothes as he was off duty and on the way to the show."

"Why didn't he go? I knew about that

because my girl was going with them."

"Somebody called him just before eight o'clock. He answered the phone himself and Mary heard him say 'Where?' and then a moment later he said, 'Right away.' Then he hung up and turned around and asked them if they would mind meeting him in front of the show at nine, that he had an appointment that wouldn't keep."

"I see." Ragan rubbed his jaw. "Well, I'll look into it. If you want me for the next hour, I'll be at Ollie's home with Angie and Mary."

"You aren't going to ask her about it now, are you?"

"Yeah. She's a cop's wife, Mark. Anyway, it will be better to get her talking and digging into her memory for some facts than sitting around moping. I know Mary, and she won't be able to sleep. She's the kind of a woman who starts doing something when she feels bad. If I don't talk to her she'll be washing dishes or something."

ANGIE answered the door when he rang. "Oh, Joe! I'm so glad you came. I just don't know what to do. Mary won't lie down, and she won't rest. And—"

"I know." Ragan patted her on the shoulder. "Forget it, honey. Mary's like that. We'll have some coffee and talk to her."

Walking through the apartment he thought about what Stigler had said. Lipstick and perfume. . . . But that didn't sound like Ollie. That was where Stigler was wrong. He hadn't known Ollie as Ragan had. Ollie had never been a chaser. If there had been lipstick and perfume on him when he was found, it had probably been put on him to throw the cops off.

And that call. That was odd, in itself. It might be that somebody had *wanted* the body found, and right away. But why? The man on the phone might have been the killer or somebody working with him. If not, what would a man be doing over in that lot at that time of night? For that matter, what was Ollie doing there? It was a dark, gloomy place scattered with old lumber and bricks among the rank growth of weeds and grass. And right in the middle of town.

"On that call, Angie. Did Ollie say

anything? Give you any idea of what it was all about?"

"No, Joe. He seemed very excited and pleased, that was all. He told us it wouldn't take long, but just to be sure, to give him until nine. We went to dinner and then to the theater, but he didn't come. He drove away in his own car. Mary and I went in yours."

At a step in the hall Ragan looked up and his eyes softened. He had known Mary Burns even longer than Ollie. In fact, there had been a time when he had liked her very much. However, that was before he had met Angie and before she had met Ollie. After that they had never even had a date together.

She was a dark-eyed, pretty young woman with a round figure and a soft, pleasant face. If anyone in the world was perfectly suited to Ollie Burns, it had been Mary.

"Mary," Ragan said, "this may seem sudden to you, but I want to ask some questions. You know that every minute counts in these things, and I know you'd feel better with your mind occupied than trying to sleep."

"I'd like that, Joe. I really would." Her eyes were red and swollen, but her chin was firm. She sat down across the table from them, and Angie brought in the coffee pot.

"Now, look," Ragan said quietly. "You're probably the only person alive who knew Ollie better than me. He was never one to talk about his work—he just did it—but he had a funny little habit of popping up with odd comments that had to do with it, and they generally gave some idea of what he was thinking. Unless you knew him they might seem utterly idiotic and incomprehensible."

"I know." She smiled a little and her lips trembled. "He often did that."

"All right, then. Ollie was working on something on his own time. I have a hunch it was some case the rest of us didn't even think about. Remember that Building & Loan robbery? He stewed over that for a month without saying anything to anybody, and then came up with an arrest and all the necessary evidence for conviction. Nobody even knew he was working on the case.

"Well, I think he was working on

something else. I think he was so hot on the trail of something that somebody got scared, and I think, somehow, they led him into a trap tonight. We've got to figure out what he was working on."

Mary shook her head. "I don't know what it could be, Joe. He was on a case, I do know that. I can always tell when there's something on his mind—when there *was* something on his mind. He would sit staring over his newspaper for minutes sometimes or walk out in the yard and sort of fiddle around, pulling a weed here and there. He never liked to leave anything until it was finished, but what it was this time, I don't know."

"Think, Mary! Think back over the past weeks, just anything, any of those absent-minded little remarks he was making. One of them might give us just the lead we want."

She furrowed her brow, and Angie filled their cups again. She looked up doubtfully. "There was something, Joe, just this morning, but it doesn't tell us a thing. He just looked up while he was drinking his coffee and said, 'Honey, there's just two crimes worse than murder.'"

"Nothing more?"

"That was all. He was stewing about something, and you know how he was at times like that. I understood and left him alone."

"Two crimes worse than murder?" Ragan ran his fingers through his dark, curly hair. "I know what one was, I'm sure. He's said it often enough. He thought narcotic peddling was the lowest crime on earth, and I agreed with him. It's a foul racket. I wonder if that was it?"

"What could the other crime be?" Angie asked.

He shook his head, scowling. Slowly, carefully, he led Mary over the past days, searching for some clue, but it was not forthcoming. However, one more thing had turned up. A week before, she had asked him to meet her and go shopping, and he said all right, that he was in the Upshaw Building and would meet her on the corner by the drugstore.

"The Upshaw Building?" Ragan shook his head. "I don't know anything about it. Well," he got up, "I'm going to have

to adopt Ollie's methods, Mary, and start doing leg work and asking questions. But believe me—I'm not leaving this case until it's solved!"

AL BROOKS was drinking coffee when Ragan walked into the café the next morning. He dropped on the stool beside the vice squad man and ordered coffee.

Al was a tall, wide-shouldered man with a sallow face. He had an excellent record with the force. He grinned at Ragan, but there was a question in his eyes. "I hear Stigler has you on the Burns case. What gives?"

"Uh-uh." Ragan didn't feel talkative. His morning coffee with Ollie Burns had been a ritual of long standing, and the ease and comfort of the big man was much to be preferred to the sharp inquisitiveness of Al Brooks.

"Funny, Stigler putting you on that detail. That's strictly Homicide."

Ragan sipped his coffee. "He figured being Ollie's friend I might know something."

After a minute Brooks looked over at him. "Do you?" he asked.

Ragan shrugged. "Not that I can think of. Something may come to me. Ollie had a habit of making off-hand remarks that tied in with his cases, and he was working on something, I know."

"You don't know what it was?"

"No, and neither does Mary, but we'll think of something."

"I still think it was a woman," Brooks said cynically. "You say he never played around. Hell, what guy would pass up a good-looking babe if she was ready? Ollie was human, wasn't he?"

"Sure," Ragan agreed. "But he was also in love with his wife. The guy had ethics. He was as sincere and conscientious as anybody I ever knew."

"Nuts!" Al got up. "Where did that lipstick come from? You mean he cornered some gorilla in that lot and the guy kissed him? Are you kidding?"

"You've got him wrong, Al. You really have. My hunch is that stuff was used for effect, that the killer wanted us to think it was a woman."

Al Brooks stared at him for a minute, then shrugged. "Have it your way, but

take a tip from me and be careful. If he was working on something and it was serious enough to call for a killing, the same parties won't hesitate at another. Don't find out too much."

Ragan chuckled. "That doesn't sound like you, Al. There never was a guy on the force stuck his neck out more than you did in pinching Latko."

"That's another thing. I had him bottled up so tight he couldn't wiggle, and none of his friends wanted any part of it. I had too much evidence."

Ragan pushed back over the stool and got to his feet. "What the hell! We're cops, and that's our job. We have to take take that as it comes; only if they tackle me they'll have a shade different problem than with Ollie."

"What do you mean?" Al asked, lighting a cigarette.

"Why, I'm sort of the rough type, Al. I like it the hard way. If they start shooting at me, I'm going to do some shooting myself. If they start slugging, I'll do some of that, too. I like to play rough, and, brother, when it comes to the killer of Ollie Burns, I'm hunting meat!"

Al Brooks waved a hand and walked out. Ragan stared after him. He had never really liked Brooks, but the man was one of the best men on the force. The way he had broken the Latko gang was an example. Aside from a few petty vice squad raids, it had been Brooks' first job, and it had been one of the best pulled all year. Then a few months later he had followed it with the arrest and evidence for the conviction of the society killer, Clyde Bysten.

Stigler saw him in the hall, hesitated for an instant, then motioned him into the office. "Joe, you knew them. How did Ollie get along with his wife?"

Ragan's head came around with a jerk. "Now, listen, Mark. You aren't going to pull that old gag. Why, they were the most loving and affectionate couple I ever knew."

Stigler stared down at the papers on his desk. "Then how do you explain that he was shot with his own gun?"

"Shot with *what*?" Shock riveted Ragan to the floor.

"That's right. Not with his issue pistol, but another gun that he kept at home.

It was a .38 Smith & Wesson. We've found the gun, and the ballistics check. The gun is on our records as belonging to Ollie."

"Oh, no!" Ragan stared at Stigler in mingled indignation and confusion. His mind refused to accept what it had heard. "Anyway," he said, "Mary still has an alibi. She was with Angie at dinner. She was with Angie from seven until I left them, long after midnight."

STIGLER shook his head. "She wasn't with her all the time. We've checked, Joe, and Mary Burns left Angie Faherty at the table and went to the powder room. She was gone so long that Angie was afraid she was ill and went to the rest room. Mary wasn't there."

"Wasn't there?" Ragan dropped into a chair and passed his hand over his face. "I don't get it, Mark. But I'll swear Mary isn't guilty. I don't care whose gun Ollie was shot with."

"What are you trying to do, Joe? Find Ollie's murderer or protect Mary?"

Ragan's face flamed. "Now, listen, Mark. Ollie's the best friend I ever had, but I'm not going to stand by and see his wife stuck for a crime she could no more do than I could. It's absurd. I knew them both too well."

"Maybe that was it." Mark Stigler's face was cold. "Maybe you did know them too well. Maybe that led to the killing."

Ragan stood flatfooted, staring at Stigler, unable to believe he was hearing correctly. He backed up and sat down.

"Mark," he said thickly, "that's the most rotten thing that was ever said to me, but you're no half-baked cop and you're not a rookie. You must have a reason. Now give it to me."

Stigler looked at him carefully. "Joe, understand this. We have almost no evidence to prove this theory. We do have a lot of hearsay. I might also add that I had never dreamed of such a thing until we found that gun in the weeds, and even then I didn't think of you. That didn't come until Hazel Upton."

"Who's she?"

"She's secretary to George Denby, the divorce lawyer."

"Divorce lawyer?" Ragan exclaimed.

"You must be going crazy, Mark!"

"Not a bit. Miss Upton told us that Mary Burns had called there to see her boss, that he was out, but that she had told her that she wanted to get a divorce from Ollie Burns."

"Now I know you're crazy!" Ragan said.

"No, we've got a statement from her. We've also got one from a friend of Mary's, a Louella Chasen, who says that Mary had asked her what her divorce had cost, and who her lawyer had been. Also, she had implied there was another man."

Ragan was completely speechless. Even before this array of statements he couldn't believe it. Why, he would have staked his life on it that Ollie and Mary were the happiest married couple he had ever known. He looked up. "But why me? Where do I come in?"

"You were the friend of the family. You called often when Ollie was on duty, didn't you?"

"Well, sure! But that doesn't mean we were anything but friends. Good Lord, man . . ."

CHAPTER TWO

The Visitors

FOR several minutes Ragan couldn't speak. He knew how a word here and there could begin to build a semblance of guilt. Many times he had told himself to be on guard against assuming too much, and here it was, facing him in his own life.

There was that old affection for Mary Burns. They could bring all that up, and he had known her before Ollie. He knew how a hard-hitting district attorney could make that look, and how he could insinuate so much more than he actually said about his relations with Mary. Ragan could see the whole picture building very carefully around him. And there were two angles he could not get around! Ollie Burns had been shot with his own pistol, and Mary Burns had no alibi. Worse still was the one thing he could not understand or believe—that Mary had actually talked of divorce.

"Mark," he said slowly, "believe me there is something very wrong here. I

don't know what it is or where I stand, but I know as well as I am sitting here that Mary never wanted a divorce from Ollie. I was with them too much. And as for Mary and me, that was a childish thing and has been over for a long time.

"I'm in love with Angie, Mark, and ready to marry her tomorrow if she'll have me. She knows that. Somehow or other we've butted into something very ugly."

Stigler's face didn't change. "Keep on with the case, Joe," he said. "If you can find out anything that will help you, go ahead. I'm afraid Mary is in a bad spot. You can't get around that gun, and you can't get away from those statements."

"They lied," Ragan said flatly. "They lied and they know they lied."

"For what? What could they gain? Why, Joe, they didn't even know why we wanted the information. Mary Burns was seen coming out of Denby's office, so we made inquiry. Then we got the statement from his secretary. As Denby was out, he knows nothing about it."

"Who saw her come out of that office?"

Stigler compressed his lips. "I can't say. It was one of our men, and he had a hunch there was something back of it, and as his hunches have paid off, we told him to look into it."

"Al Brooks?" Ragan demanded. "Was it Al Brooks?"

"Don't start anything, Ragan," Stigler said sharply. "Remember, you're not in the clear yourself. You make trouble with Al and I'll lock you up as a material witness." His face softened. "Damn it, man, I don't want to believe all this, but what else can I do? Who had access to that gun? She and you. Maybe your girl friend, too. There wasn't anybody else."

"Then you've got three suspects," Ragan said grimly. "I wish you luck with them, Stigler."

Nevertheless when he went outside he felt sick and empty. He knew how much could be done with so little. Still, where had Mary Burns gone? And what was all this divorce business?

For a moment he thought about climbing into his car and driving out there to find out what was what. Then he decided

against it. There was more to do, much more.

He remembered that Mary said Ollie had called her from the Upshaw Building. There was no reason why that should mean anything, yet it was a place to begin, so he turned his car in that direction and soon was leaving it parked near the drugstore where Ollie had met Mary to go shopping.

THE UPSHAW BUILDING was a third-class office building with a small café on the ground floor and, across the entrance, a barber shop. There was a newsstand in the foyer of the building, and he walked slowly over to it and began to look over the magazines. There was a red-haired girl behind the counter and he smiled at her. He was a big young man with a winning Irish smile, and the girl smiled back. "Is there something I can find for you?" she asked. "Some particular magazine?"

"Give me a package of gum," he said. Then he looked around. "I was sort of watching for a friend of mine. Big guy with a wide face, weighs about twenty. Small scar on his jawbone. Do you know him?"

"Him?" The girl smiled, leaning her forearms on the top of the showcase. "Sure. He comes here a lot, although I don't know what for."

"Maybe to see you?" Joe grinned. "I wouldn't blame him, at that."

"He's a nice guy," she said. "Married, though. I saw the ring. He was talking to me about Nebraska."

"Are you from there? I used to work out in a gym in Omaha. I was a fighter for a while."

"You sure don't look it. I mean, you aren't banged up much. You must have been pretty good."

"Fair." Ragan peeled a stick of the gum. So Ollie had been here more than once? And just standing around? "He's friendly, my friend is. Likes to talk."

"Yes, he does. I like him. He's sort of like a big bear."

"All warm and woolly, eh?"

She laughed. "He did talk a lot, but I like it, and he's easy to talk to. He's a good listener." She looked at Ragan again, appraising his shoulders. "What

business is he in? He told me he was looking for an office."

"He's a sort of lawyer. Doesn't handle court cases, just works on briefs, and like that." He asked, "Did he find an office? I expect it's pretty hard these days."

"Oh, they're full up here. Of course, there's that office on the fourth floor. He was sort of interested in that one because nobody was around and he thought they might be going to move out. I don't see why anybody wants an office when they never use it."

"Never use it?" Ragan took it carefully. "Seems kind of dumb, paying rent and not using it. That's like buying a car and parking it in a garage. It doesn't make sense."

"It sure don't, and they've had that office for almost a year. I think Mr. Bradford has been in just twice in all that time. Maybe he comes in at night. I know old lady Grimes—she cleans up around here—she says he's been here several times at night. I asked her about the office, thinking maybe I could find out something for your friend, but she said they had a special lock on the door and they have their own cleaning man who comes twice a week."

Joe Ragan was very thoughtful. He steered the subject to the latest movies and songs, then strolled over to the elevator and went up to the fourth floor.

He had no idea what he was looking for, only that Ollie Burns had been here, and Ollie was not a man who wasted his time. Getting off on the fourth floor he walked slowly down the hall and glanced around. Ahead of him he saw an open door, and just opposite from it a closed door with a frosted upper panel. The name on the door was *John J. Bradford, Investments*. There was a mail slot in the door.

As he walked past, Ragan glanced in the open door at a young man who sat at a desk there. He was a short, heavy-set young man with shoulders like a wrestler. He looked up sharply, and there was something so intent about his gaze that Ragan was puzzled by it. He walked on down the hall and went into the office of a *Jacob Keene, Attorney At Law*.

There was no girl in the outer office,

but when he entered she walked out to meet him. She was not a day over twenty, with a slim and lovely body in a grey dress that left little to the imagination but much to think about and more than a little to remember. "Yes?"

Ragan grinned. "Now that's the way I like to hear a girl begin a conversation. It saves a lot of trouble, doesn't it? Usually, they only say it at the end of the conversation."

"Oh, they do?" She smiled and looked him over coolly. "Yes, for you I imagine they do." Then her smile vanished. "Now, may I ask your business please?"

"To see Mr. Keene. Is he in?"

"Just a minute." She turned, and her rounded hips lost nothing by the movement. "A gentleman to see you, Mr. Keene."

"Send him in." The voice was crabbed and short.

Joe Ragan stepped by the girl, and she stood there against the door jamb, looking up at him, her lips parted a little, as he passed. Then she stepped out and drew the door shut.

JACOB KEENE was a small man who gave the appearance of being hunch-backed, but wasn't. His face was long and grey, his head almost bald, and his eyes were the eyes of a weasel. He took Ragan in with one glance, then motioned to a chair. "Can't get any girls these days that don't spend half their time thinkin' about men," he said testily. "Women aren't like they were in my day." He looked up at Joe, and suddenly the hatchet face broke into an almost engaging smile. "Damn the women of my day! What can I do for you?"

Ragan hesitated, then decided against any subterfuge. "Mr. Keene, I don't think I'm going to fool you, so I'm not going to try. I'm looking for information and I'm willing to pay for it."

"Son"—Keene's eyes twinkled with devilry—"your last phrase touches a subject that is very close to my heart. Pay! What a beautiful word. Money! Another beautiful word. Money, they say is the root of all evil. All right, let's get to the root of things!"

"As a matter of fact, I don't have much money, but what I wanted will cost

you no effort. Shall we say," Ragan drew ten dollars from his pocket book, "a retainer?"

The long and greedy fingers palmed the ten. "And now, this information?"

"I want to know all you know about John J. Bradford and his business."

Keene's little eyes brightened. The light in them was speculative. "Ah?" He hesitated. "Bradford? Well, well."

"Also, I want to know something about the business across the hall, and about the young man at the desk."

Keene nodded. "Notices everything, doesn't he? Most odd, I'd say, unless he's paid to notice. That could be, you know. Well, young man, you have paid me. A paltry sum, but significant, significant."

"Bradford is a man of fifty, I should say, although his walk seems to belie that age. He dresses well, conservative taste. He calls at his office exactly once each month. The cleaning man takes away the mail."

"The mail?" Ragan studied the idea. "The cleaning man takes it away?"

"Exactly. An interesting fact, young man, and one that has engaged my fancy before this. Ah, yes. Money. We all like money, we all want money, and I think our friend down the hall has found an interesting short cut. People come to his door, but they never knock or try to enter—they just slip envelopes through the mail slot."

Keene glanced at the calendar on his desk. "Wednesday. Four should come today, but they will not arrive together. They never arrive together. Three are women, one a man."

He drew a long cigar from a drawer and bit off the end. "Nice place I have here, son. I see everything and everyone that comes or goes in the hallway. See that mirror? I'm out of the way of the door, but I see without being seen. It helps to while away the time. Not much practice these days, but what I get is good."

Keene leaned forward tensely. "Look, young man. Here comes one of the women now."

She was tall, attractive and no longer young. Ragan guessed she was all of fifty. She walked directly to the slot and dropped a letter in, then turned abruptly

and walked away. He was tempted to follow her, but on second thought decided to wait and see what happened.

It was twenty minutes before the second woman came. Joe Ragan sat up sharply, for this woman was Mary's friend, Louella Chasen. The woman whom Mary had, according to Stigler, asked about a divorce lawyer. She too, walking abruptly to the door of Bradford's office, dropped an envelope through the slot, then hurried away.

Keene nodded, his small eyes bright and ferretlike. "You see? They never knock, just slide the envelopes through the door and go away. An interesting business Mr. Bradford has, a very interesting business."

Three women and a man, Keene had said. That meant that another woman and a man were due to arrive soon. He would wait. Scowling, Ragan lighted a cigarette and lounged back in his overstuffed chair, one leg over the arm. Keene busied himself over some papers, seeming to have lost interest. Suddenly, however, he spoke without looking up. "Look into the mirror now," he said softly.

Ragan looked, his eyes speculative. The big-shouldered young man had come out into the hallway and was looking around. He threw several sharp glances toward Keene's office and then returned to his own. A few minutes later a tall young man, fair haired and attractive, if somewhat weak looking, dropped an envelope into the slot, then hurried away. It was almost a half-hour after that when Joe Ragan, growing sleepy from his vigil, glanced up to see the last visitor of the day.

She was young and she carried herself well, and Ragan sat up sharply, sensing something vaguely familiar in her walk. Then she turned her head toward Keene's office, and he saw her face. It was Angie Faherty, his own girl friend. She dropped a letter into the slot and turned away.

"Well," Keene said briskly, "you've had ten dollars worth. Those are the four who come today. Three or four will come tomorrow, and so on each day. They bunch up, though, on Saturday and Monday. Can you guess why?"

"Saturday and Monday? Probably be-

cause they draw their pay on Saturday. They must be making regular investments."

Keene chuckled. "Investments? Maybe. And that last young lady—she has been coming here longest of them all. Why, it's over six months now since she started coming here with her . . . donations."

Ragan heaved himself erect. "See you later. If anything turns up let me know. Or better, save the information for me. I'll be around."

"With more money," Keene said cheerfully. "With more money, young man. Let's grease the wheels of inflation."

CHAPTER THREE

Man on the Fire Escape

ANGIE was drinking coffee at their favorite place when Ragan walked in, and she looked up, smiling. "Have a hard day, Joe? You look worried?"

"This case gives me the willies. I'm afraid they're going to make some trouble for Mary."

"For Mary?" Angie was amazed. "How could they?"

He explained swiftly and her eyes darkened with righteous anger. "Why, that's silly! You and Mary! Of all things!"

"I know," he said. "But a district attorney could make it look bad. And where was Mary when she left you, Angie? Where could she have been? That's what gets me."

"We'll ask her. Let's go out there now."

"All right." He got up. "Have you eaten?"

"No, I came right here from home. I didn't stop anywhere."

His eyes found the pigeons on the walk, and he watched them pecking up crumbs thrown from the restaurant. "Been waiting long?"

"Long enough to have eaten if I had thought of it. As it was, all I got was this coffee."

That made the second lie. She hadn't been here for some time. And she hadn't come right here from home. He tried to give her the benefit of the doubt. Maybe

the visit to the Upshaw Building was so casual she didn't think about it. Still, it was far out of her way in coming from home to here.

All the way out to Mary's he mulled that over. And another idea kept cropping up in his mind. He was going to have to get into that office of Bradford's. He was going to have a look at those letters and see what they contained. Moreover, there might be another clue.

Yet what did he have to tie them to Ollie's murder? Little enough, actually. No more than the fact that Ollie had loitered in the Upshaw Building, that he had been interested in Bradford's office, and that Louella Chasen had volunteered the information that Mary Burns had asked for a divorce. That was a flimsy tie, yet it intrigued him, and it was a beginning.

Try as he would he could come up with no other clue to the case that Ollie Burns had been working on, unless he went back to the Towne suicide. Mark Stigler had mentioned that as holding Ollie's interest, and it was worth a bet. The first thing tomorrow he would get on that angle.

He remembered Alice Towne. Ollie had known her slightly through an arrest he had made in the neighborhood. She had been a slender, sensitive girl with a shy, sweet face and large eyes, and her sudden suicide had been a blow to Ollie, for Ollie liked people and had considered her a friend.

"You know, Joe," he had said once, "I always felt maybe that was my fault. She started to tell me something once, then got scared and shut up. I should have kept after her until she talked, because I knew something was bothering her. If I'd not been in so much of a hurry, I could probably have figured it out."

Mary opened the door for them and they walked in. Joe sat down with his hat in his hand. "Funeral tomorrow?" he asked gently.

Mary nodded. "Will you and Angie come together?" she asked.

"Why, maybe you'd better have Angie with you," Ragan suggested. "You two stick together. I'll be working right up to the moment, anyway."

Mary turned to him. "Joe, you're

working on this case, aren't you? Is there any other way I can help?"

Ragan hated it, but he had to ask. "Mary, where did you go when you left Angie the night Ollie was murdered?"

Her face went stiff and she seemed to have difficulty moving her lips. "You don't think I'm guilty, Joe? You surely don't think I killed Ollie?"

"Of course not!" He gave her that flat and straight. "Not even a little, but they're asking that question, Mary, and they'll want an answer."

"They've already asked, and I've refused to answer," Mary said quietly. "I shall continue to refuse. It was private business, in a way, except that it did concern someone else. I can't tell you, Joe."

Their eyes held for a full minute, and Ragan got up. "Okay, Mary. If you won't, you've got a reason, but don't forget that reason may be a clue. Don't hold anything back. Now let me ask you: Did you ever think of divorce?"

"No." Her eyes looked straight into Ragan's. "If people say I did, they're lying. From what Mr. Stigler said, I believe someone has said that. It simply is not true."

AFTER Ragan left them he thought about that. He was willing enough to take Mary's word for it, knowing her, but would anybody else? In the face of two witnesses who would say the contrary? And the fact that Ollie had been shot with his own gun.

Moreover, he was getting an uneasy feeling. Al Brooks was hungry for fame and advancement. He liked going around and he liked spending money, and despite the fact that he always seemed to have plenty, Ragan knew that a step up in rank would suit him very well indeed. If he could solve the killing of Ollie Burns and pin it on Mary or Ragan, he would not hesitate. He was a smart, shrewd man, and he had connections.

Ragan had several lines of study to follow now. The Towne case was an outside and remote chance, but the Upshaw Building promised better results.

What had Angie been doing there? What did the mysterious letters contain? Who was Bradford?

Taking his car, Ragan drove swiftly across town, heading for the Upshaw Building. He had his own ideas about what he was going to do now, and the law would not condone them. Nevertheless, he was going into that Bradford office or know the reason why. His visit to Keene's office had not been without profit from that angle. He had noticed that the fire escape under Keene's window also extended to what was probably a window of the Bradford office. The lock on the Bradford office was a very good one, placed on it by the tenant, and it would be anything but simple to open.

Parking the car a block away, Ragan walked up the street. Then, taking a quick gander either way, he walked on to the Upshaw Building. There was a night elevator man drowsing over a newspaper, but by walking softly Ragan got to the stairs and went up rapidly. That night man might be in the pay of Bradford. In any event, the less anyone knew of Ragan's activities the better he would like it.

The fourth floor was dark and still. He stood for a moment at the head of the steps, watching and listening. Not a sound broke the stillness. Walking carefully, he went along the hall to the door of Keene's office. He searched for one of his skeleton keys that might open the door. At the same time, automatically, he tried the knob. The door opened under his hand. He stepped inside, then froze in his tracks.

The body of a man was slumped over the desk.

He sat in the swivel chair, face against the desk, his arms dangling at his sides. All this Ragan saw in the sporadic flashes from a large electric sign on the roof of the building across the street, and he closed the door softly behind him, studying the shadows of the room.

It was dark and still, the room lighted only by the indefinite glare from that electric sign. The corners were dark, and the place near the safe was dark, and the shadows lay deep along the walls of the room.

Ragan's gun was in his shoulder holster, and it felt reassuring in its weight. Moving forward, careful to touch nothing, he leaned forward and spoke softly. "Say, you?"

No reply, no movement. With a fountain pen flash, he studied the situation.

Jacob Keene was dead. There was a blotch of blood on his back where a bullet had emerged. There was, Ragan noted as he squatted on his heels, blood on Keene's knees and on the floor under him, but not much. Not enough. He had a hunch then that Jacob Keene's body had been moved. Flipping on the light switch, he glanced quickly around the office to ascertain that it was empty. Then he began a careful survey of the room.

Nothing was disturbed or upset. It was as he had seen it that very afternoon, with the exception that now Keene was dead. Careful not to touch anything, he knelt on the floor and studied the wound. The bullet had apparently entered low in the abdomen and ranged upward, an odd angle. The gun, which he had missed seeing before, lay under Keene's right hand.

Suicide? That seemed to be the idea, but remembering Keene of that afternoon, Ragan shook his head. Keene was neither in the mood for suicide nor was he the type of man for it. No, this was murder. It was up to Ragan to call Homicide, but he hesitated. He had a few other things to do first.

The first thing was to carry out his original idea to see the inside of that office of Bradford's. To all appearances Keene had been murdered elsewhere and brought here. Maybe he had been killed trying to do exactly the same thing Ragan was about to attempt.

ABSOLUTE silence hung over the building. Ragan put his ear to the wall and listened for minutes, waiting for a sound, but there was none. Carefully, then, he eased up the window. Four stories below a car buzzed along the street, then silence. The windows facing him were all blank and dark. Stepping out on the fire escape, a drop of rain struck his face, and he glanced up toward the lowering clouds. If it rained, that would be good, for in a rain no one would be inclined to look up.

With utmost care, flattened against the building, he made his way the few feet to the other window. It was closed and unlighted. After listening, he put his hand out carefully, hoping the window was not

locked. It was, though. He took the chewing gum from his mouth and plastered it against the glass near the lock, then tapped it with the muzzle of his gun. The piece could not fall inward as it was against the lock, and he lifted it out very carefully, then slid a finger through and released the lock.

The window slid up and he lowered his feet to the floor of the Bradford office, then moved swiftly away from the window and against the wall. For a long time he stood absolutely still, studying the office. Then, using utmost care, he began a minute examination.

For one hour he shook that office down, but it offered nothing. Nothing? One thing only: a large damp patch on the floor, a patch of dampness where blood might have been washed off. But blood can never be washed away completely in such a hurried job, and Ragan knew what a laboratory test would prove. However, he was not looking now for a solution to the murder of Jacob Keene, but for information that would offer a motive, for the killing of Ollie Burns.

The office was like any office except that every clue proved it was little used. There was a typewriter, paper, carbon and second sheets, boxes of envelopes. The blotter on the desk was new, unused. There were paper clips, rubber bands, a dictionary, and various other things. The filing cabinets had varied references to mines and industries. The office was all it purported to be, except for that damp place on the floor.

Then he noticed something he had missed. It was a tiny, crumpled bit of paper lying on the floor under the desk as though someone had tossed it to the wastebasket and missed. Retrieving it, Ragan unfolded it carefully and flashed his light upon it.

ME 34556.

Ollie Burns' phone number!

Here was a definite lead, but to where? Irritated, Ragan stood in the center of the office, wondering what to do next. Somewhere near him might be the clue that he needed. Suddenly there came to mind one of the titles of the companies he had noticed in leafing through the files, and swiftly open the drawer labeled T. In a moment he had it: Towne Mining &

Exploration. Under it were a list of code words and then a list of sums of money indicating that fifty dollars a month had been paid until the first of the year when the payments had been stepped up to one hundred a month. Four months later there was the entry: "Account closed, 20 April."

His heart was pounding now, for Ragan remembered very clearly that the suicide of Alice Towne had been discovered on the 19th of April.

Towne Mining & Exploration Company. . . . Was there such a firm? He had noticed that in each drawer of the cabinet there were several well-known companies listed, but no payments on any of them. These must be a blind—probably for blackmail.

What had Ollie told Mary? "*There are just two crimes worse than murder.*" Dope peddling and blackmail.

Who else had come to this office? Louella Chasen. Ragan drew out the drawer with the C on its face, thumbed through it to a folder entitled Chasen Shipping.

A quick examination showed the payments here to have progressed from ten dollars a month to a hundred a month over a period of four years.

Louella Chasen was the one who had said she recommended a divorce lawyer to Mary Burns. Would Louella Chasen lie to protect herself? If blackmail would force such sums of money from her would it not force her to perjure herself?

Hazel Upton, the secretary to Denby, the divorce lawyer. Her name, thinly disguised, was here also.

It was the merest sound, no more than a whisper of sound as of cloth brushing paper, that interrupted him. Frozen in place, Ragan listened, heard it again. It came from the office of Jacob Keene, where the murdered attorney still lay.

Ragan's hand went to his gun, a reassuring touch only. This was neither the time nor the place for a gun. Swiftly, his eyes swung to the window. It stood open, and so did the window in the office of Jacob Keene. If someone had come there, that someone would see the open window, and a glance, if that someone leaned out would show this window to be open too. And if the man who was in the next room

happened to be the murderer . . .

Even as he thought of that, Ragan knew there was something else in that cabinet that he had to see—the folder on Angie Faherty.

There was no time for that now. The door into the hall was out of the question, for it was locked from the outside with a patent lock. The only exit from this office was the way he had come.

Like a wraith, Ragan slid from the filing cabinet to the shadow near the big safe, then to the blackness of the corner near the window. Even as he reached it, he heard the sound of a shoe touching the iron of the fire escape. The killer was coming in.

It was very still. Outside, a whisper of rain was falling now and there was the sound of traffic and the buzz of tires on the wet pavement of the street below. The flashing electric sign did little to light the room, and Ragan stood there, holding his breath and waiting.

A stillness of death hung over the building. The murderer on the fire escape was waiting, too, and listening. Listening for some movement from Ragan.

Did he know Ragan was there? And who was it out there? It was a good question.

With a quick glance at the window, Ragan gauged the distance to the telephone. Then, moving as softly as possible, he glided to the side of the desk and crouched beside it. With his left hand he shifted the phone to the chair. Then he lifted the receiver.

Holding the phone, he waited. Suddenly, tires whined on the pavement, and he dialed Operator, hoping the sound would be covered by the passing car. "Police Department!" he whispered. "Quick!"

In a moment a husky voice answered, "Police Department!"

"Get this the first time," Ragan breathed. "There's a prowler on the fire escape of the Upshaw Building."

Ragan's voice was a low whisper, but the desk sergeant got it all right. He repeated it, and then Ragan eased the phone back on the cradle. The light from the sign flashed, and from his new position he could see the dim outline of the figure on the fire escape edging closer.

The police would be here in a minute. If only the figure on the fire escape would linger until . . . He heard the siren's whining far off, then, and grinned. It was going to be nip and tuck now, fast work whatever happened, and even as the siren whined closer, Ragan's heard the man outside give vent to a muffled curse. Then the cars slid into the street below and he heard feet clang on the fire escape, going down.

CHAPTER FOUR

One More Corpse

FOR a breath-taking instant, Ragan waited, then ducked out the window even as a police spotlight flung its glare up the wall. One flashing instant before the glare had reached him, he ducked into the Keene office. Below, he heard a yell. "There he is!"

They had spotlighted the other man. Ragan ducked out the door, pulled it shut and raced for the back stairs. Down he went, three at a time, risking his neck with every jump. When he hit the main floor he slowed down and saw the watchman standing in the wide door, craning his neck. On cat feet Ragan slipped up behind him, got one foot on the sidewalk, and said, "Did they get him?"

The watchman jumped a foot. He turned around, his face white, and Ragan flashed his badge. "Gosh, mister, you sure scared hell out of me! What's the matter?"

"Prowler reported on the fire escape of this building," Ragan said. "I'm watching this door."

Sergeant Casey came hurrying up. When he saw Ragan he slowed down. Casey was one of Ragan's buddies, for this was a burglary detail if the prowler had been robbing offices. "Hello, Ragan. Didn't know you were here."

"Did you get him?"

"No, we sure didn't, but Brooks almost did."

"Al Brooks?" Ragan's scalp tightened. What had Brooks been doing here? Tailing Ragan? Ragan hadn't even thought of them putting a tail on him, but Brooks was just the guy to do it.

"Yeah, he was on the street and saw

somebody up the fire escape. He started up after them just as we came up. Fellow got away, I guess."

"Ain't been nobody around here," the watchman stated flatly. "Only Mr. Bradford, and he left earlier."

"What time was he here?" Ragan asked.

"Maybe eight o'clock. No later than that."

Eight? It was now almost one in the morning, and Keene had not been dead long when Ragan had found him. Certainly no more than an hour, at a rough guess. His body hadn't even been cold.

Al Brooks came around the corner of the building with two patrol car officers. His eyes widened when he saw Ragan, then narrowed. He was suddenly watchful, cagey. "How are you, Joe? Didn't expect to see you here."

"I get around," Ragan said quietly, shaking out a cigarette.

"You'd better get your nose clean before you get around too much," Brooks said.

Casey interrupted them. "We'd better go through the building, Ragan," Casey said. "Now that we're here. The man might be hiding upstairs."

"Good idea," Ragan said. "Let's go!"

Everything was tight and shipshape all the way to Keene's office. Ragan was letting Casey and a couple of the boys precede him a little. It was his idea to have them find the body. It was Casey who did.

"Hey!" he yelled. "Dead man here!"

Ragan and Brooks came on the run. "Looks like suicide," Brooks commented. "I doubt if this has anything to do with the prowler, although it might."

"Doesn't look like he got in here," Casey said.

"But the window's open—" Brooks stared. The window was closed. "You know," he said, "when I was coming up this fire escape I'd have sworn this window was open."

He turned to the body at the desk. "Looks like suicide," he said. "The gun's right where he dropped it."

"Except that it wasn't!" Ragan said dryly. "This man was stabbed before he was shot."

"What?" Brooks whirled and stared

suspiciously. "Where do you get that stuff?"

"Look." Ragan indicated a narrow slit just above the bullet wound in the stomach. "That looks to me like he'd been stabbed; then somebody put the gun barrel on an angle calculated to let the bullet follow the path of the knife. Then a murder becomes an apparent suicide. And I'll bet the gun belongs to Keene."

Brooks' head came up. "How did you know his name?"

"From the door," Ragan said. "Jacob Keene, attorney at law."

Brooks shut up, but Ragan didn't like the look in his eyes. Brooks was getting ready with the knife.

Meanwhile, Ragan did some wondering. What had become of the prowler? Up above somewhere? That was where he wanted to look. He was still thinking about that and carrying on a preliminary examination of the office without disturbing anything when Mark Stigler came in. He looked quickly at Ragan, then at Brooks.

"Lot's of talent around," he said grimly. "What is it, murder or suicide?"

The slit in the material of the shirt was barely visible, but Ragan indicated it. "Could be," Stigler agreed doubtfully. "Seems kind of far-fetched, though. Who was this guy?"

"From his files," Ragan said, "he must have been a sort of an ambulance chaser, a shyster, but handling a good many minor criminal cases, too."

STIGLER'S boys got to work while Stigler stood there chewing on a toothpick and staring around the room. Mark Stigler was a smart cop and a conscientious one. Nor was he any fool. He walked over to that window and glanced at it, then rested his hand on the sill. "This window has been open," he said. "The sill is damp."

"The prowler," Casey said. "Maybe it was him."

Stigler looked around, frowning, and Al Brooks shoved his hat back on his head and took over. Quickly, he explained that he had been on the street below and, glancing up, saw the dark figure outside the window on the third floor. Just as he started up he heard the sirens

and the cars showed up. "About that time," he added, "Joe Ragan showed up."

Stigler nodded and glanced at Ragan. "How are you coming on the Burns case?"

"Good enough," Ragan said. "I'll have it busted by the end of the week."

Stigler looked at him thoughtfully. "We've got a strong case against his wife," he said, "and Brooks thinks she killed him. She or somebody close to her."

That meant Ragan, of course.

"Brooks doesn't know what he's talking about," Ragan said. "Mary Burns loved her husband, loved him in a way Brooks couldn't even understand."

Brooks laughed unpleasantly. "Bud," he said grimly, "I hope you're right, but I've piled up a lot of evidence. And there *might* be somebody else in it, and I don't mean Mary Burns!" He was grinning at Ragan when he said it, and Ragan knew he was hinting at Angie.

Ragan walked over to him, fists knotted. "Listen, Brooks," he said, "don't try to pin anything on any friends of mine, see? If you've got the goods, all right. But you start a frame and I'll bust you wide open!"

"Cut it out, Ragan!" Stigler said sharply. "Any more talk like that and you'll draw a suspension. I won't have fighting on a job of mine."

"Anyway," Al Brooks replied softly, "I don't think he could do it."

Ragan just looked at him. Some day, he knew he would take Brooks and take him good. Until then, he could wait.

There was nothing for Ragan to do, so he got out of there. He wanted to be away where he could do some thinking. An idea had occurred to him that was positively insane, and yet . . .

Where had Al come from? How had he happened to be on the scene so quick?

The street below, within sight of the window, had been empty. Yet the searchlights of the police cars had caught the figure, who turned out to be Al Brooks, on the fire escape.

Ragan thought about that. He thought about that and a few other interesting things about Al Brooks. Such as: Al Brooks dressed better than any man on the force. He drove a good car, one of

the best made. He lived in good apartments and he always seemed to have money, more money than a police detective should have, maybe.

Now that he was working on the idea, a lot of things occurred to him. He got into his car and started for home, thinking about it. This was something he could get busy on; this was something he could really work over. It had been Al Brooks who first suggested that Mary Burns might have killed her husband.

Stopping his car, Ragan got out and crossed the walk. There was a strange car parked at the curb a few doors away, and he stopped and looked at it thoughtfully. For some reason the car disturbed him, and he turned and walked toward it. There was no one inside, but it was not locked. Opening the door, he looked at the registration card. Valentine Lewis, 2234 Herald Place.

The name meant nothing to him, and he turned away and walked up to his private entrance and fitted the key in the lock. As he opened the door he was thinking that the blackmailer could have influenced both Hazel Upton and Louella Chasen to start the divorce rumor, and if Brooks . . . He stepped into the door and the roof fell on him.

Wildly, grabbing out with both hands, Ragan fell forward to his knees. He couldn't comprehend what was happening. Then there was a smashing blow on his skull as he was hit a second time, and he slid forward, faster and faster, head first down a long slide into darkness.

WHEN Ragan fought his way out of it he was lying on the floor, and his head felt like a balloon. Grey light was filtering into the room, and he decided that it must be almost daylight. For a while he lay still, just trying to gather his thoughts together, and then he got to his hands and knees and to his feet. Swinging over, he dropped on the divan and sat there with his head in his hands.

His skull was drumming as if an insane snare drummer had gotten hold of it, and his mouth felt sticky and full of cotton. He lifted his head and almost blacked out. Slowly he stared around the room. Nothing had been taken that he could see. Then he felt for his handkerchief and

realized that his pockets had been turned inside out.

Staggering to the door he peered into the street. The strange car was gone.

"Val Lewis," he told himself grimly, "you'd better have a good story if you aren't guilty, and if you slugged me, God help you!"

Somehow, he got out of his clothes and into a shower, and then tumbled into bed. His head was cut in two places from the blows, but what he wanted most was sleep. It wasn't until well past noon before he awoke, roused by the phone.

It was Angie. "Joe!" Her voice was frightened and anxious. "What's happened to you? Where are you?"

"I must be home," he said. "When the phone rang, I answered it. Where are you?"

"Where am I?" Her voice was angry. "Where would I be? Don't you remember our luncheon date?"

"Frankly, I didn't," Ragan said. "I got slugged on the head last night, and—"

"At least," she interrupted, "that's an original idea."

"And true," Ragan said. "I was visiting an office in the Upshaw Building and then—"

Her gasp was audible over the phone. "Joe! Where did you say? The Upshaw Building?"

"That's right." He was remembering her call there. "Some people up there play rough, honey. They murdered a lawyer up there last night. He knew too much and was too curious about a fellow named Bradford."

She didn't say a thing. Not one thing. "The slugging," Ragan continued, "happened here, after I got home. I think somebody wanted to find if I carried anything away from that building."

That was an idea that came to him while he was talking, but it made some kind of sense. What other reason was there? Thinking it over, it struck him as remarkable that he hadn't been killed out of hand. They had probably killed Ollie Burns for little more. Or less.

She still didn't speak, so he asked her. "How's Mary? Is she all right?"

"Joe!" She was astonished. "You don't know? She was arrested this morning. Al Brooks arrested her!"

Brooks. Ragan's grip tightened on the phone until his fist turned white. "So he arrested her. All right, that does it. I'm going to blow everything loose now."

"What are you going to do?" She sounded anxious.

"Do?" Ragan's voice was rough. "Honey, that whole case is built on a bunch of lies. I happen to know that Louella Chasen and Hazel Upton were forced to lie by a blackmailer. Right now is where I start trouble."

"Joe, did you say . . . a blackmailer?"

"Yes, Angie, a blackmailer. The same man who hounded Alice Towne to death and started Ollie Burns hunting for him. The same one who murdered Ollie, and last night murdered Jacob Keene."

"You mean," he could tell nothing from her voice, "you *know* all that? You can prove it?"

"No," Ragan said. "I can't prove it. But I will, honey, I will!"

After he hung up Ragan got into his clothes and looked at his face. It was an Irish face, slightly altered by a right hook that he'd stopped with his nose long ago. The hook hadn't done so much damage, leaving only a lump, and a small one, on the bridge. What had happened to the guy who put it there was in the record books. He'd lost on a knockout in the fourth round and never fought again.

A razor smoothed the beard from his face while Ragan turned the case over in his mind. He decided to start with Val Lewis and then work his way through Hazel and Louella. Also, he was going to have a talk with that luscious job Keene had for a secretary, and maybe with the sharp-eyed lad who kept an eye on Bradford's door.

FOR the next two hours Ragan was a busy man. He skidded around to several people and checked through the files of some back papers at the morgue of the *Times*. Also, he checked on the address Val Lewis had on his steering wheel post.

The door was answered by a dyspeptic-looking blonde in a flowered gown that concealed little. She looked rather the worse for wear and had a shadow of a blackeye.

"I'm looking for Valentine Lewis,"

Ragan said politely. "Does he live here?"

She looked Ragan over with a fishy eye. "What do you want to see him for?"

"Veteran's Administration," Ragan said vaguely. "Some money for him."

"That's a lousy joke," she said coldly. "Val was in stir all during the war. Come again."

"Police Department." Ragan flashed his badge and pushed by her.

She came to with a yell, strident and furious. "You get out of here, copper! You got no search warrant!"

"Yes, I have," Ragan said, and, taking one from his pocket, flashed it at her. She didn't get a chance to see more than the top of it, for it was just a form he'd partly filled out himself. She didn't ask any questions but stood by muttering under her breath while Ragan shook the place down. He struck it rich. Lewis had enough guns in the house to start a civil war. Three Service Colt .45's and a tommy gun.

That was all Ragan needed. He dialed Headquarters and told them to come down and to bring along a warrant for Valentine Lewis. Any ex-convict with a gun in his possession was on his way back to jail.

Blue Eyes stood there looking mean. "You think you're smart, don't you?" she snapped finally.

That turned Ragan around. "Baby," he said, "whatever I am, I'm not dope enough to buck the law."

"No," she said, sneering, "you're just a dope. A first-class dope. You cops aren't smart enough to make any money for yourselves, so you just crab it for others."

"A cop doesn't have to be smart," Ragan explained gently, "although the mere fact that he's on the side of the law shows he's far from dumb. But a cop doesn't have to be smart because he's got organization, records of crimes and methods of operation, finger prints and photographs. He's got organizations in every city, he's got the help of the FBI, and, honey, you can't beat organization."

"You'd better have a squad when you go after Val," she said venomously. "I'd like to see you try it!"

The police cars were even then drawing up in front. "Lady," Ragan said,

"that's just what I'm going to do, get him alone. He works in the Upshaw Building, doesn't he?"

Her surprise showed he was right. "Well," Ragan continued, "I am going to send you down to Headquarters, and then I'm going after your Val. In case you don't know, he slugged me last night. Now it's my turn!"

Her eyes widened. "Oh? So you're Joe Ragan," she said. Then her face stiffened, realizing she had made a miscue. "I hope he burns you down!"

Mark Stigler was with them when they came in. He looked grimly at the assortment of guns. "That would have outfitted half the crooks in America," he said angrily. Then he looked up at Ragan. "What is this? I thought you were going to break that Burns murder?"

Ragan's eyes turned to the girl. "This is part of it," he said. "See what this girl has to say. I don't think she wants to be an accessory."

She was really frightened now, but Stigler was still looking at Ragan. "You think this Val Lewis did it?"

"If he didn't, he knows who did."

ALL the way up to the Upshaw Building Stigler sat there chewing his cigar while Ragan gave it to him, fast and straight. All but the guy who did it. He built up the blackmail background, told him how Ollie had been worried by the Towne suicide, how he had worried at the problem like a dog over a bone. How Ragan's idea was that Ollie had been murdered because he stumbled into something really big, a blackmail ring.

He explained about the Bradford office, the letters dropped there, and the people who dropped them. Only one thing he left out. He said nothing about Angie. She was Ragan's girl, and he was still going to bat for her. She was being blackmailed and if he could cover for her, he would.

"You think they dropped money in those envelopes?"

"That's right."

"Find any of it to prove your theory?"

"No," Ragan admitted, "I didn't. I think all of those records in those filing cabinets, with the exception of a few well-known company names, are blackmail

cases. I think from what I can remember of those files that the take must have run into thousands of dollars a month. They weren't bleeding just big shots—they were bleeding husbands and wives, clerks, stenographers, beauty operators, everybody, and the take was just rolling in. I think this Bradford, whoever he was, was a smart operator, but I think he had somebody else with him. Somebody who knew Ollie."

"Somebody who could get close to him?"

"Yes, and somebody who knew Ollie was getting close to the solution. Also, somebody who could get into his house after that gun or get it from his locker."

Stigler rolled his cigar in his lips. "You're doing a lot of talking," he said grimly. "It sounds good, but you've got to have the evidence!"

At the Upshaw Building, Stigler loitered around the corner of the hall and let Ragan go up after Val Lewis. Lewis was sitting there in his door where he had been before. As Ragan turned toward the door of the Bradford office Lewis got up and came around his desk. "What do you want?"

"What business is it of yours?" Ragan said. "I want into this office. Also—I want you for assault and murder!"

Lewis was too hot-headed for his own good. He started a punch, and it came fast. But Ragan rolled his head and slammed a right into Lewis' belly that jerked his mouth open, and then he hooked a left to the bridge of Lewis' nose. The nose folded under his fist like a wad of paper.

He was a big bruiser, bigger than Ragan, and built like an All-American half, but the fight was out of him. Stigler walked up a moment later. "You got a key to this place?" he demanded.

"No, I ain't!" Lewis said sullenly. "Bradford's got it."

"To hell with that!" Ragan's foot came up and he smashed his heel against the door jamb. A second time, then a third. It broke loose and he put his shoulder against it and pushed it open. While a harness cop took Val down the hall, he opened the filing cabinet.

It was empty.

A second and a third were empty too.

Mark Stigler looked from Ragan to the smashed door. "Boy, oh, boy!" he said. "This is the prize! Now what?"

Ragan stood there, feeling sick. The files had been removed some time after he'd left the place. By now they were hidden or destroyed. And there was going to be a lot of explaining to do about this door. Stigler glared at him. "When you pull a boner, Joe, you sure pull a Lulu!"

"Mark," Ragan said, "do something for me. Get the lab busy on that floor. This is where Keene was murdered. Right there."

"How do you know?" Stigler demanded.

Ragan swallowed. "Because I was in here last night after the murder."

Stigler's eyes were like grey gimlets. "You were in here last night *after* the murder? Were you that prowler?"

"No," Ragan said, and gave it to him, everything, his meeting with Keene, his return, his finding the body, and the mysterious watcher outside.

"You got any idea who that was?" Stigler demanded. His eyes were fixed coldly on Ragan.

Ragan hesitated. "Maybe I have. But I don't want to say now."

CHAPTER FIVE

Knife-Fighter

ODDLY, Stigler didn't follow that up. He just looked at Ragan and then he walked around the office, looking into this and then that. He was still puttering around when Ragan looked up to see the blonde in the door. "Hi, honey," she said cheerfully. "This is the first time I ever saw this door open."

"Who you working for now?" Ragan asked.

She smiled. "Nobody," she said. "I'm out of a job. Need a secretary?"

I grinned. "Lady, I could always find a place for you!"

Stigler turned around and looked at her from under his heavy brows. Then he rolled his cigar. "What do you know about this Bradford?" he demanded.

"Bradford?" Her eyes sharpened. "Why, I know plenty. Will it do?"—she

nodded toward Ragan—"him any good if I talk?"

"Plenty," Stigler said with emphasis.

"All right, then." She was suddenly all business. "I know that the man who has been calling himself Bradford for the past three months is not the Bradford who opened this office. He is a taller, broader, younger man.

"Furthermore, I know he was in my office last night after closing hours and must have been there after Mr. Keene was murdered."

Stigler took his cigar out of his mouth and stared. "How do you figure that?"

"Look." She crossed to the water cooler, and from the waste basket below it picked out a paper cup. "The man who calls himself Bradford has strong fingers. When he squeezes a paper cup after drinking, he shuts his right hand down on it, hard. He crushes it flat, then pushes the bottom up through the top a little way."

She picked up the waste basket and showed the half-dozen cups to Stigler. He looked at them, then walked out and headed for Keene's office. She followed and picked up the basket under the cooler there. "See? One cup, left intact. That was Mr. Keene, and on top of it, above this paper that Mr. Keene threw away last night, a crushed cup."

Stigler chewed his cigar. "Lady," he said with genuine respect, "you'd make a copper."

Outside, in the street, Stigler said little. He was mulling something over in his mind. Ragan knew the man and knew he was bothered by something. Finally Stigler spoke. "Do you think those records were destroyed?"

"I doubt it," Ragan said. "If what that girl thinks is true, he hasn't been running this business long. He'd need the files to use himself."

Stigler nodded. "Joe, I don't know where you're getting, but you'll get some more time on it, and I won't push the case against Mary Burns until I hear more from you. In the meantime," he took the cigar from his mouth, "I think I'll check the unidentified dead and missing reports for the past three months."

Stigler got into his car and rolled away from the curb. Ragan stood there staring after him, and then realized that some-

body was at his elbow. He turned. It was the blonde with the figure. "Can I help? I told you I was out of a job."

"Not unless you can remember something more about Bradford and that set-up," Ragan said. "Did Keene know any more about them?"

"He was interested in a girl who came there," she said hesitantly, "and he had me follow her once."

"A girl? What sort of a girl?"

"A slender girl with red hair. She wore a green suit."

FOR a moment Ragan stood there looking at his cigarette. There was no sense in this, none at all. His mind turned to the blonde next to him. "What's your name, honey?" he asked after a minute.

"I wondered if you even cared," she said, smiling a little. Oddly, there was no humor in her eyes, just something faintly wistful and somehow very charming and very young. "It's Marcia Mahan," she said, "and I meant what I said about helping."

Somehow, now, Ragan didn't know what he wanted to do. After all, there wasn't much evidence on Mary. Could they convict her? They had the testimony of Hazel Upton and Louella Chasen that she wanted a divorce, and of Angie Faherty that she had left the café for the rest room, but had not been in the rest room at the time of the killing.

The gun was Ollie's own, too. Yes, with work they could build a pretty stiff case against Mary. Quiet, lovely Mary Burns. No, Ragan couldn't step out now, no matter what happened. He owed it to Ollie. Ollie would have done as much for him. Yet now, suddenly, he began to see how it all was pointed, and the end he could see in sight made him feel sick and empty and helpless. One can control events only up to a point, and then the lives and feelings of other people enter in, and after that there is no longer any control.

Other things were clicking into place now. His memory was a good one, trained by police work, and he remembered suddenly something that he had forgotten. In those files there had been a company with the title Bysten Packing Company.

One of the big cases that Al Brooks

had broken was that of Clyde Bysten. A blackmail case.

Ragan threw his cigarette into the gutter. "All right," he said. "If you want to help, you can. I want you to check on the insurance office," he noted down the address, "where Alice Towne worked. I want to have a list of the employees at that office during the time she worked there. Can you do that?"

Marcia nodded. "It will be easy."

"And meet me at the Peacock Bar at four."

Things would happen fast now, Ragan decided. Grabbing a cab, he headed for a bank. Within a matter of minutes he was closeted with the one vice president he knew there, and a few minutes later was getting the dope on an account. When he left that bank he felt as if he'd been kicked in the stomach.

Yet his job was only beginning, and from then until four he was busy checking back files of newspapers, using the telephone to save his legs, calling business firms, checking charge accounts and property lists. At the end of that time he had a formidable list of information, blackening information, that left him feeling worse than he could ever remember feeling in his life.

Outside that cocktail lounge, he stood waiting on the curb to finish his cigarette. The late afternoon sun was warm, and he was tired. He could see no end to what was coming. The night was going to be a busy one, for once more he was going to enter an apartment without a search warrant, only this time he was hoping he would find nothing. He was, in fact, going to enter two apartments.

Marcia was waiting for him, a bourbon and soda in front of her. She placed the list on the bar and Ragan scanned it. His heart almost stopped when he saw that name—the one he was almost positive he would see, and feared to see.

Marcia smiled at him. "You act as if you'd lost your best friend," she said. "Can I help?"

"Not right now," Ragan said. "But tonight you can."

She laughed. "I hope you don't mean what I think you do."

He chuckled. "Honey, this is business tonight, strictly business."

WHEN Ragan came into the Homicide Division, Stigler was behind his desk. "Think I've got it," he said, shoving a card at Ragan. "Sam Bayless. He did two stretches for confidence games and was hooked into one blackmailing deal which couldn't be pinned on him. Smooth operator, fits the description we have of Bradford."

"Dead?"

"Yes. He was found shot to death in the desert near Palmdale. Shot four times through the chest with a .38. We have one of the slugs."

"Good deal!" Ragan looked at him. "Can you check it with that gun?"

"We will, somehow." Stigler chewed his cigar. "Have you got anything more?"

"Too much." Ragan hesitated. "He's not in this alone. He's got help. A woman."

Stigler rolled his cigar in his lips. "I had a hunch," he said. "You know who she is?"

Ragan nodded. "Before the night's over, I think we can cinch this case," he said quietly. "I'm going to look around now."

* * *

It was his duty, his duty as a police officer and to the memory of Ollie Burns, a good friend and a square cop, but he felt like a traitor. It was late when he went to the place near the park and stopped the car. For the purpose he had rented a car, and with Marcia Mahan there with him, they would look like any couple necking. They sat there, and Ragan was quiet. Too quiet.

"What do you want me to do when you go in?" she asked.

"Sit still. If they come back, push the horn button."

The door of the apartment house opened and a man and woman came out laughing and got into the car. Ragan saw the man's face. It was Al Brooks, hard, reckless, confident. He didn't want to look at the girl, but he had to. He knew who it would be. Angie Faberty.

For an instant her face was full under the street light and Ragan saw her eyes come toward his car. She said something softly to Brooks. Ragan turned toward

Marcia. "Come on, honey, and make it look good."

She did. She came into his arms as if she belonged there and had been there for years, and the first time her lips met his the hair curled all the way to the top of his head.

Brooks came across the street toward the car and flashed a light on them, but Ragan's face was out of sight against her shoulder, and Marcia pulled her head up long enough to say, "Beat it, bud! Can't you see we're busy?"

Brooks chuckled and walked away. Ragan heard him make some laughing remark to Angie, and then they were driving off.

Marcia unwound herself. "Well!" she said after a minute. "If this is the kind of work detectives do . . ."

"Come here," Ragan said cheerfully. "They might come back. I think we'd better give them at least fifteen minutes of leeway. They might forget something and come back."

"I think," Marcia said dryly, "that you'd better go on inside and see what you don't want to see. I'll wait."

Opening the door was no trick. Once inside Ragan took a quick look around. It was all very familiar. Too familiar. Even to the picture of himself on the piano. That picture must have given Brooks many a good laugh.

The search was fast, thorough and successful. The files were there, lying in plain sight on a shelf in the closet. He took them down and was bundling them up when the horn honked.

They must have come fast, because when he swung around the key was already in the lock. Ragan grabbed up the files. One handful slipped and he ducked to grab it and the door slammed open. Al Brooks, his face livid, stood framed in the door.

Slowly, Ragan put the files down. "Well, Al," he said, "here it is. You've been waiting for this."

"Sure," Brooks said. There was concentrated hatred in the man's eyes. "And I'm going to like it!"

He had his gun in his hand, and Ragan knew the man was going to kill. But he wasn't going to kill Ragan without Ragan putting up a struggle.

Brooks fired, and something burned Ragan along the ribs. Ragan knocked him back over a chair and went over after him. They came up slugging. Brooks came in throwing them with both hands and caught Ragan with a wicked right that jarred clear to Ragan's heels, and then an overhand left that smashed his ear and made his head ring like a church bell.

Ragan had not been a fast light heavy for nothing, and punches had been in

HELICAT OF HOMICIDE HIGHWAY



By BRUCE CASSIDAY

The redheaded kitten showed her claws—and dared car-pirate Johnny Blood to shoot it out . . . with his past.

Plus more bang-up suspense stories by your favorite authors: JOHN D. MacDONALD, MEL COLTON, PETER PAIGE and others . . . in the big July issue—on sale June 3rd.

 **DIME
DETECTIVE
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CONTINUED WITH FLYNN'S DETECTIVE FICTION

his line of business. He took those two going in and smashed a left and right to the body. Brooks backed up, and Ragan hooked a wicked left to his mouth that smeared it into bloody shreds, then dropped a right down the groove. Brooks ducked to keep his chin away from that payoff punch and took it over the eye. It cut to the bone and started the blood down his face in a shower.

Shoving him away, Ragan swung again. Brooks jerked up a knee for Ragan's groin, but Ragan twisted away. Brooks jumped him then. His weight turned Ragan around and he ran a forearm across Ragan's throat. Grabbing the man's hand and elbow, Ragan dropped to one knee and flipped him over his shoulder. Brooks got up slowly from that one, and he looked a sight.

"What's the matter, chum?" Ragan said. "Can't you take it? Come on, tough boy! You liked it, and you wanted it, and now you're getting it!"

Brooks came in again, but Ragan smashed him under the chin with the butt of his palm, then across the face with an elbow. Brooks staggered, gagging, and tried to fight. Ragan got a handful of hair and jerked the face under it down into the top of his head, which he was jerking up, hard. A nice touch, but hard on the features.

THE DOOR smashed open and Ragan looked up. It was Mark Stigler with a squad, Casey in the lead. "Got him?" Stigler asked. Then he saw Brooks. "Man, oh, man!" he said with admiration. "What did you use on him? A cleaver?"

"There's the files," Ragan said, indicating the heap where he had dropped them. "You'll find the Towne, Chasen and Upton payoffs there, and probably a lot more."

He looked toward the door. "Did you—I mean—well, what happened to Angie?"

"She's in the next room," Stigler said. "That blonde is with her."

It took Ragan a minute to get his heart slowed down to where he could walk inside. Angie Faherty did not look as lovely as he'd remembered her. In fact, she looked venomous at the moment. Her

hair was all out of shape and she had a cut on one cheek.

"What hit you?" Ragan demanded.

Marcia looked up, smiling pleasantly. "A girl named Mahan. She gave me trouble, and I socked her."

Angie said nothing at all, and it wasn't in Ragan to get tough. She had double-crossed him and helped to frame Mary Burns, and still it wasn't in him to hate her. "What made you pull a stunt like this?" he asked.

She looked up. "You can't prove anything. Not a thing. You can't tie me in with this!"

"Sure we can, Angie," he said gently. "It's all sewed up, tight and neat. You killed Ollie Burns, and then you smeared him with lipstick. With you, whom he trusted, he would have talked. It was Al called him, but you met him there after you got Mary called away. Mary thought you were in some kind of trouble, and when she came back and you were gone, she, out of the goodness of her heart, tried to cover for you. She never dreamed you had killed Ollie.

"You took the gun out of their home. That was what puzzled me, for I thought about Al Brooks, and knew when all was considered that he couldn't get it away from the house. Or have access to it. You did.

"You had a good setup after Brooks came in. We've even got that angle figured out. You were in it with Bayless, or Bradford, if you want to call him that. You worked with Alice Towne, and you got the information on her that Bayless used in blackmailing her.

"On one of his vice raids, Al Brooks picked up a lot of information, and somehow he got hep to what you and Bayless were doing, so he declared himself in. Then he killed Bayless and you two took over the show. He killed Keene when he caught him in the office after hours. Knifed him, then shot him to make it appear to be suicide."

"Got it all figured out, haven't you?" Brooks sneered from the doorway. "We'll see about this when I get out!"

Stigler shook his head. "They don't get out of the gas chamber, Al. We got one of the bullets you put into Bayless.

(Continued on page 130)

ODDITIES IN CRIME

By MAYAN and JAKOBSSON

Way back when China was still young, an un-predicted solar eclipse threw the country into chaos. Hsi and Ho, official court astronomers, were promptly sought out for an explanation, and turned out to be the only two guys in the Orient who were completely unaware of any eclipse, both being drunk. They were immediately hanged, and the transcript of the trial reads, "Hsi and Ho, sunk in wine and excess, neglected the ordering of the seasons and allowed the days to get in confusion."



Probably very few swindlers have ever worked with the single-minded purposefulness that Martin Kern exhibited toward the end of his life. Kern, who belonged at one time right up with the best, having fooled such dignitaries as J. P. Morgan and the U. S. Government out of some ten millions, knew exactly what he wanted.

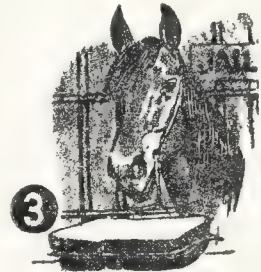
At the age of 77, Kern was found in bed, a suicide, with a note and \$200 on the table beside him. The money, specifically meant to save him from a pauper's funeral, had been bamboozled only that week from the life savings of a floor maid in his hotel!

On the banks of the Avon in England lies the world's only one-horse jail. It is inhabited, of course, by a horse—serving a life sentence, after conviction on charges of assault and robbery. The horse, formerly a dependable public servant who pulled the ashcart of a nearby township, had been pastured in an open field near a picnic ground. After years of law-abiding behavior, the horse went sandwich-mad and began to battle picnickers for their lunches—on one occasion, going so far as to eat through the coat a girl had hastily thrown over her refreshments.

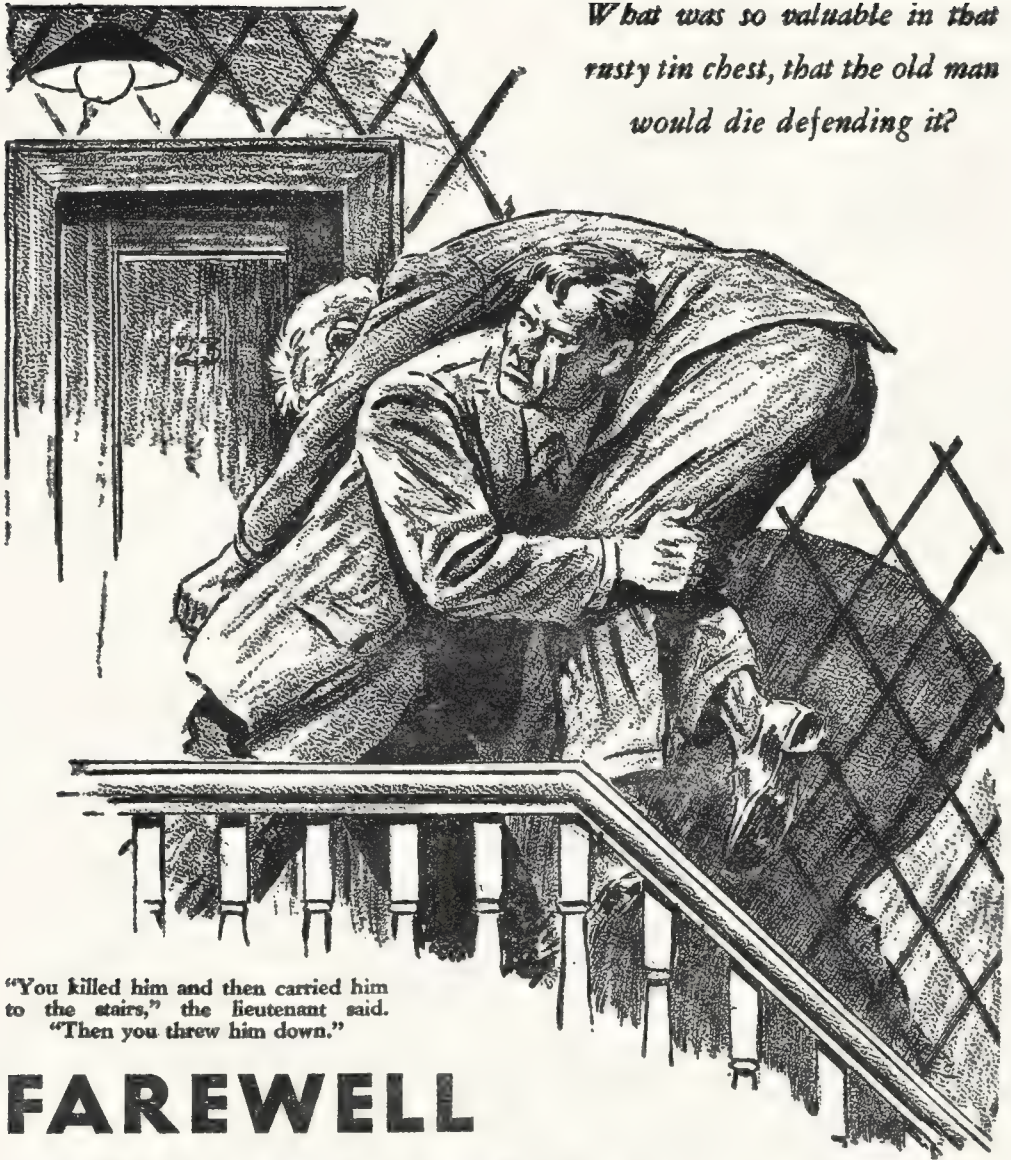
He was brought to court; a lawyer was appointed to plead for him; but he proved to be his own worst witness, and a high strong fence was built around his pasture, where he was sentenced to spend the rest of his days.

Uneducated, brutish Jim Lowell of Lewiston, Me., had a habit of maltreating his spouse, Lizzie, who finally succumbed to one of his beatings. Jim got away with it for a time, simply explaining that Lizzie had run off with another man. Then her body was found, Jim pleaded not guilty, was tried, convicted and sentenced to hang.

Jim's foot froze while he was waiting to meet his Maker and just before his execution, he confessed. The results astonished even him. The prosecutor immediately asked for a stay of execution, personally interceded with the governor to win for Jim a full pardon! It's the only legal precedent of its kind—authorities accepted Jim's I-done-it-and-I'm-sorry, set him scot free.



What was so valuable in that rusty tin chest, that the old man would die defending it?



"You killed him and then carried him to the stairs," the lieutenant said. "Then you threw him down."

FAREWELL APPEARANCE

By **MORRIS COOPER**

"**A**ND the handsome prince took the beautiful young princess by the hand and they walked into the garden. There was dancing sunlight on the flowers and the birds sang softly and sweetly, like the choir in church every Sunday morning. Because forevermore,

by decree of the beautiful princess and the handsome prince, sadness had been banished from the land and all the people were happy."

The echo of the clear, deep voice lingered in the living room as it came to the end of the story. The ten-year-old girl

who was sitting cross-legged at his feet looked at the proud old head covered with white hair, looked at the old face seamed with a network of pale scars. On a sudden impulse she jumped to her feet and threw her arms about his neck.

"You're the most wonderful friend I ever had," she said.

"Thank you, Louise. And now, if you please, my sword." When she left, he rose and spoke to the young couple who were seated across the room. "The evening was delightful. And my compliments on your daughter." His eyes twinkled at the young couple. "Some day, if she is fortunate, she may be as beautiful as her charming mother."

Mrs. Travers blushed "Must you leave so soon?"

"I am getting old, my dear, and the time I now spend in bed has become for me a pleasant anticipation."

Danny Travers got to his feet, saying,

"I'll go start the car. He bent his thin, gawky frame and kissed his wife's cheek. "Won't be long, hon."

Louise came back from the hall, a gold-headed cane in her hand. Gravely she held it out to the old man. "Your sword, my lord."

He took it with a careless, almost rehearsed gesture and bowed from the waist. "Thank you, my lady," he said, kissing her on the forehead. "I shall see you again next month, and if you remember to ask, I may tell you a story about the magic sword."

Louise was standing in the lighted doorway, waving as the car pulled away. "You're a very fortunate man, Danny, having a wife like Margaret and a daughter like Louise."

Danny chuckled contentedly. "I'm afraid I'll have to be immodest and agree with you, Mr. Dean."

"Mr. Overell, Danny." The old man's voice was suddenly harsh. "There is no longer a Mr. Dean."

Danny said, "Sorry, it just slipped out." He turned his head slightly and caught a glimpse of Mr. Overell's face, looking almost tragic in the moonlight in the car. Danny's voice was hesitant. "Why don't you change your mind about staying with us? We've all the room in the world and you know how happy we would be."

"I know," the old man said, "But I'm afraid I am too old to change."

"At least you could allow me to see some of your old friends." He twisted the wheel to avoid a rut caused by street car tracks long out of use. "Or you could see them yourself."

"It's a face the world remembers, Danny. I've told you that before. And I'm too old and tired to try and pass off a new one."

Danny slowed as he turned into the dimly lit street, lined with dilapidated buildings and cheap taverns. He braked to a stop in front of one of the buildings. Even though it had become a familiar sight, he had difficulty in repressing a shudder when he read the paint-peeled sign that hung over the doorway

ACME HOTEL
Rooms, \$5.00 wk. & up
Beds, 50c per night

Mr. Overell looked at the dashboard clock. "After midnight," he said. "I hadn't realized I was keeping Louise up so late."

"One night a month isn't so bad," answered Danny. "And she's storing up memories that will live with her forever."

Mr. Overell got out of the car and put his hand into Danny's. "Good-night, and thank you again for a wonderful evening."

Danny watched him go into the Acme Hotel, noticed the threadbare suit, meticulously neat in a pitiful way, saw the sudden defeated sag as the old man started up the dirt-encrusted stairs.

"Damn!" Danny leaned over and slammed the car door shut with a helpless irritability. Sometimes this was a hell of a world, he thought.

THE BELL rang harshly in his ears and Danny snapped on the bedlamp, reaching sleepily for the alarm clock. Then he realized that it was the insistent clapper of the telephone that had awakened him. He looked at the alarm clock. Two-thirty, not more than a couple of hours since he had gone to bed.

He held the receiver to his ear, and suddenly he sat upright, the sleep gone from his eyes. "Thank you," he said. "I'll be right down."

Margaret stirred sleepily, "Who is it?"
"The police," Danny said. "Mr. Over-

ell—there's been some kind of an accident."

He put a quick palm over her mouth to smother the involuntary cry. "Shh! we don't want to wake Louise."

There was the inevitable crowd in front of the Acme Hotel when Danny braked to a stop. He shouldered his way through the crowd of seedy hangers-on, came to a uniformed patrolman who stood in front of the closed door. "My name is Travers," he said. "A Lieutenant Mallard phoned me."

The officer nodded, opened the door to let Danny in, then quickly closed it before any of the street spectators could satisfy their morbid curiosity.

A short, stocky man leaned against the dull grey banister, ashes from the dead cigar in his mouth weaving a jerky trail down the front of his grey vest. A bored young man was taking pictures.

On the dirty floor, his head resting on the bottom step almost as if it were a pillow, was the body of Mr. Overell. His silver-headed cane lay under one crumpled leg, and the worn spots on his blue suit were almost obscene in the raw glare that came from an uncovered light bulb. Danny saw a faint, purplish tinge on the tip of his jaw, and then he turned away.

The stocky man rolled his cigar to a corner of his mouth. "I'm Lieutenant Mallard," he said. "You must be Travers."

Danny nodded. "How—how did this happen?"

Mallard shrugged his shoulders, moved away from the banister. "Desk clerk says it was an accident. Could be."

He started up the uncarpeted stairs, motioned for Danny to follow. "Yours was the only name we found in his wallet. That and fifty one-dollar bills."

"I know," said Danny. He moved alongside Mallard as they came to the first landing. "I gave them to him earlier in the evening." He looked at the waist-high clerk's desk, at the ink-blotted register, at the weary line of keys that hung in a dejected row. He could hear the faint mumble of voices that came through a closed door on the other side of the desk.

"So." Mallard grunted and wrinkled his nose in disgust at the stale odor left by years of unwashed bodies and almost never washed floors.

DANNY followed him down the hallway, through an open door and into a dismal room that made his stomach creep. Another bored-looking young man was leaning against a dingy dresser, his hands balled up in his trouser pockets.

"Where's the clerk?" Mallard asked.

"Tom's got him in his cubbyhole, taking down a full statement."

"Okay," Mallard said. "You might as well go outside and get some air." The young man left the room.

Danny looked at the iron bed, the rumpled grey sheets, the cracked wash-bowl against the far wall. He had noticed the community toilet in the hall.

"Lousy, isn't it?" Mallard said.

Danny nodded his head. "Terrible. But I still don't know what happened."

"Well"—the lieutenant started to sit down on the bed, changed his mind—"Stevens, that's the desk clerk, says Overell came in a little after twelve. Stevens was behind his desk, and when Overell came to the landing, he lifted his hand in a half salute. Then he suddenly crumpled up and tumbled down the stairs. Stevens doesn't know if the guy had a heart attack or tripped."

"He had a bad heart," said Danny.

"That fifty in dollar bills?" asked the lieutenant. "I'm curious."

Danny looked at the floor near the open door, absently noticed the four canes lying against the wall, like stiff dead soldiers. "I work for the city relief program," he explained. "Mr. Overell was on old-age pension."

He paused a moment. "This may sound a little funny to you, but years ago he was a famous actor. He had an accident that left his face a mess. It took all the money he had, but he managed through plastic surgery to get a new face—and that was the whole trouble."

The lieutenant opened the single window of the room and looked out on an uninspiring, dirty brick wall. "I'm listening."

"Well, when it was all over, he was broke and his heart was acting up. His face was all right, but it didn't look like his old one and that was the rub. He felt that the public would no longer know him, and he couldn't bring himself to accept the pity of his old friends."

"The fifty," prompted the lieutenant.

"He still had a lot of pride left," Danny said. "So I arranged to pick up and cash the check for him each month. He liked the feel of a wad of bills—maybe it was silly but I saw no harm in it." He glared at the lieutenant.

Mallard asked, "What do you know about a tin box?"

"Box?" There was a blank look on Danny's face as he echoed the question.

"We found it under the bed," said the



"Nothing will ever convince me he told that clerk his name," Danny protested.

lieutenant. "Pried open and nothing in it. No fingerprints."

"You've got me there," said Danny.

Another of the bored-looking young men that Danny was getting used to poked his head through the open doorway. "I've got Stevens' statement."

Pockmarked skin whose sole duty seemed to be to offer some contrast to a purple, scarred nose slid into view behind the young man's back. "Okay if I go back to work now, Lieutenant? Got a lot to do." He sniveled, and Danny wondered if he'd ever had his adenoids removed.

"How about it, Tom?"

The young man came into the room, stepped to one side. "Stevens used the name Dean a couple of times. May be something in that."

The lieutenant looked at the clerk, framed in the doorway like a bad painting. "Well?"

"He used to be an actor," the clerk whined. "Guess the name just slipped out."

Danny demanded, "How do you know he was an actor?"

"He told me." There was a hint of defiance in the voice.

Mallard looked at Danny, then back to the clerk. "Okay, go back to your work, but don't leave the building unless we tell you to."

They listened to his footsteps scuttle down the hallway, then Danny said, "There weren't more than half a dozen people who knew that Overell was Dean. I'll never believe that he told Stevens."

There was a far-away look in the lieutenant's eyes, and for the first time since Danny had seen him he took the dead cigar from his mouth. "Robert Dean?" he asked.

Danny nodded. "I saw him only once when I was a kid, but I'll never forget his performance."

"I saw him too," the lieutenant said. He shook himself as though to ward off the dead ghosts that roamed through the hotel. "C'mon," he said. "Let's get out of here and have a cup of coffee."

DANNY sat at the breakfast table, his coffee cold and untasted. Margaret stood idly near a curtained window, her eyes red-rimmed. He'd come back a couple of hours ago and found he couldn't go to bed. Before he left, Mallard had told him that it could still be an accident.

"We've got to take Stevens' word," he explained. "None of the other tenants know anything. The kind that live in places like that learn never to open their doors and always to mind their own business."

"But the name," Danny had protested. "I still say nothing will ever convince me that Dean told it to that ratty clerk."

Mallard had shrugged his shoulders, rolled the new dead cigar in his mouth. Danny couldn't remember when he had lighted a fresh one. "I don't know how we can prove Stevens is a liar."

"The medical examiner?" asked Danny. "What did he say?"

"That purple mark on his jaw—maybe someone socked him, maybe his chin hit the stairs on the way down. And the approximate time of death jibes with the clerk's story."

Danny looked up from the table when Louise came into the kitchen. Her face was sad, and Danny could see that she was making a valiant effort to keep back the

tears. Margaret said, "She knows, Danny."

"Did you get the treasure for me, daddy?" Louise asked.

"Treasure?"

"Mr. Overell told me he had a magic chest, and some day he would show me what it held. He said it had a story in it about a king who lost his kingdom."

Danny shook his head. "I didn't see any chest, darling."

The tears gushed forth and she threw herself in his arms. "Oh, daddy, daddy! Now I'll never know what was in his chest." She buried her head against his breast. "Last night I gave him his golden sword and now I'll never see him again."

Danny sat there, clutching Louise, and suddenly something clicked. An hour later he was seated in an office at headquarters, facing Lieutenant Mallard.

The inevitable cigar rolled in his mouth. "We gave the place a good going-over," said the lieutenant. "Found the old newspaper clippings under Stevens' mattress. Guess he didn't have a chance to get rid of them."

"The magic chest he told Louise about," Danny murmured. "That tin box full of old newspaper reviews of his shows."

The door opened and Stevens came in. Mallard nodded the furtive clerk toward an empty, straight-backed chair.

"What's up?" the clerk demanded. "I ain't done nothing."

"Shut up," Mallard said. "I got a story to tell you." He built a pyramid with his fingers, rested his chin on his thumbs.

"Mr. Overell—or maybe I better start calling him Dean—came into his room last night, after leaving Mr. Travers." He flicked a glance in Danny's direction. "Dean opened the door to his room, leaned his cane against the wall and then snicked on the light. That's when he saw the intruder. He—"

"You're crazy!" Stevens shouted, half rising from his seat. "He fell down the stairs." The cold glint in Mallard's eyes stopped him short, and he sank back into the chair.

Mallard continued, "You were the intruder, Stevens. You got excited when he caught you rifling his box, and you clipped him on the chin. Maybe his heart stopped

then, or maybe he died when his head hit the floor.

"You got panicky then, looked out into the hallway to see if the way was clear and then carried him to the stairs. Then you threw him down. Before you called the police, you hid the newspaper clippings under your mattress."

"Dean gave them to me to hold," Stevens said. His eyes darted about the room as if trying to find a means of escape. "Said he thought somebody might try to steal them from him. Besides, what'd I want to look in his box for anyway?"

"Money. Jewels, maybe." Mallard stood up. "The cane," he said, "had only Dean's fingerprints on it."

"So what." Stevens' voice was puzzled.

"You still insist that Dean fell when he reached the top of the stairs?" Mallard questioned.

"Sure I do." Stevens relaxed, began to feel almost triumphant.

"He didn't go to his room first?"

"Of course not. Wasn't I there to see everything that happened?"

"There should have been another set of prints on that cane, Stevens. The prints of a little girl who played it was a golden sword."

The stocky lieutenant walked around his desk, stood over the clerk. "When Dean went into the Acme Hotel, he was carrying a gold-headed cane. When we found him, there was a silver-headed cane at the foot of the stairs."

"So maybe somebody is color blind," Stevens muttered.

"But," the lieutenant went on, "we found the gold-headed cane in Dean's room. And it had the little girl's prints on it. You should have made certain when you threw Dean down the stairs that you had the right cane. But after all, perhaps it's best that your kind doesn't have too much vision."

Danny and the lieutenant sat quietly after they had taken Stevens away. Then Mallard said, "I'll drop over to your house one of these days. Want to know if your daughter remembers any of those stories Dean told her. I kind of think I'd like to hear them." He touched a match to a fresh cigar and Danny watched the smoke cloud the look in Mallard's eyes.

T O R P E D O



The key had worked perfectly, and in a moment Frankie stood inside the big, lighted room—with a job to do. . . .

By

SHAD COLLINS

Frankie Brill, killer, was leaving no stone unturned on this job—especially, no gravestone.

FRANKIE BRILL carefully placed the sawed-off shotgun on the automobile seat and fumbled through his pockets for a cigarette. He was beginning to be uncomfortable and even a little bit uneasy. He had waited a long time for the appearance of the man he had come to kill. Cramped in the front seat of his automobile which was now parked in front of a house on a quiet street, he was feeling irritable toward J. C. Peters for not showing up, and he had begun to think that it had been a mistake not to have got rid of the sawed-off, the same gun he had used in the Mallory killing.

Then, because he was a sensible man who had calculated the chances and decided that the scatter-gun was the best bet, he smoothed away the irritation, pinched out his cigarette so as not to be conspicuous in the car in the falling dusk, and lifted the gun into his lap once more.

"He's the only witness," Frankie Brill thought, remembering the terrified face of Peters from the one time that he had seen him. "When he's gone I'm in the clear and everything's tidied up."

It gave him a feeling of complete satisfaction to think of it, not only because the death of Peters would put him out of danger from the police, who undoubtedly were hunting him for the Mallory job, but because Brill was a methodical, business-like individual and hated to leave any loose ends.

Peters was the loose end of the Mallory

affair, but he was something that could not have been foreseen. Brill had spent some time setting up the job and had done it as neatly and simply as it could have been done. It had required a little patience, but from the moment he discovered that, once a week, Mallory was in the habit of staying late in the downtown office which he used as a front, Brill had known how he was going to kill the gambler. All he had needed was the key, since he already had the shotgun. It had taken him a week before he had the opportunity to take a wax impression of the lock in order to have the key made, but since he was in no hurry the delay had not disturbed him. When he had the key, everything was ready.

On the night he had shot Mallory he had waited just as he was waiting now for Peters. The crowd had poured out of the building, first a torrent and then a dribble, and he had waited patiently until the last of them had gone and even, finally, the elevator operator. Then he had got smoothly out of his car, the gun hanging comfortably from the clips under his top-coat, and had gone in. The key worked perfectly, as he knew it would, and in perhaps thirty seconds from the time of his leaving the car he was in the big, lighted room, which had the data from the last race still up on the wall, and he was looking at Mallory down the shortened barrel of the gun. Mallory was trying to get up from behind the long desk at which he worked and he was trying to say something, but there was nothing he could say that would interest Frankie Brill, who fired both barrels into Mallory's chest because he was a methodical man and wanted to make certain.

That was when he had seen J. C. Peters for the first time, although he had known the man's name on that occasion. Peters had come out of a room that opened off the main office. He was a tall, thin man, wearing dark glasses, and he stood at the doorway, his hand on the wall as if to support himself, his face dead white, frightened and somehow bewildered, looking squarely at Frankie Brill as if he didn't know what had happened.

"That was where I made my mistake," Frankie Brill thought judiciously, and again felt a little tug of uneasiness.

INSTEAD of making his getaway, he thought, he should have shot Peters then. But Brill was himself badly shaken, seeing the white-faced man appear where Brill had no reason to expect him, and to break the shotgun and reload was too much even for a methodical man. Brill had run out into the hall, clipping the gun under his coat again, and had made his escape. There had been no hitch at all. The building had been deserted, there was no one on the sidewalk in front. He would have been in the clear except for the man with the white, scared face and the glasses, the witness whose name Frankie Brill had learned the next day from reading the papers, the man he was now waiting to kill.

Brill had spent a long week, hiding, waiting for the hunt to die down, and the strain of the wait was in the impatience he felt as he watched the door of Peters' house. A car came up the street and stopped a few lengths in front of Brill's automobile, and he tensed, cocking the gun. Then the car door opened and a laughing woman and a man got out and went into a house three doors down from Peters' place. Brill relaxed. There was a car a quarter of a block behind him. He watched it in his mirror, as he had been doing. It looked dark and empty. Brill began to fumble for a cigarette, and the porch light came on at Peters' door.

Brill saw a tall, thin man wearing dark glasses step onto the porch. Peters closed the door carefully and turned, lifting a cane in his hand. He looked distinguished, Frankie Brill thought in the second that it took him to lower the glass in his door and lift the shotgun. He sighted along the barrel and then before he could fire, the world of Frankie Brill seemed to break up in a hurricane of noise and agony and smashing glass.

He came to consciousness in the police ambulance with Lieutenant Carson leaning over the stretcher.

"You staked me out," Frankie Brill said.

"That's right," Carson said. "We set you up. We didn't expect to get the gun you used on Mallory, though. Getting that gun is enough to cook you."

"That was a mistake, keeping the gun,"

(Continued on page 129)



GENTLEMAN JIM GREEN-LEAF settled back comfortably in his chair and slowly exhaled a cloud of smoke. It was a lovely smoke, and Gentleman Jim didn't have to blow it in the form of dollar signs to tell us that it was clear Havana, the best money can buy, and that it was somebody else's money that had paid for it.

"Those were the days," Gentleman Jim said reflectively. "Exciting, full of dash and color. Every day brought forth a new adventure, and the nights—ah, the nights!"

"You were going with Hot-fingers Gertie then, weren't you, Gentleman Jim?" we inquired, prodding the old boy on.

"Yes, I was going with Gertie then," Gentleman Jim said. "Sometimes known as Hot-fingers Gertie. Her true name was Gertie Fliegel. Not very romantic, but then—who would seek to read a person's soul in a name? Ah, yes—Gertie. A flaming spirit, with huge brown eyes and a figure that caused a traffic jam every time she crossed Fifth Avenue. And she crossed Fifth Avenue very often, too, in the course of her business. She was an extraordinarily talented shop-lifter. It will be long before the world sees her like again." He sighed.

We prodded him again. "You ever see Willie Murdock around any more, Gentleman Jim?"

"Willie Murdock," he said, and sighed again. "Good old Willie the Cadillac. A

promising car thief. When I first met him, he was known as Willie the Ford. But prosperity went to Willie's head. After a while he insisted on being known as Willie the Cadillac. He had a penchant for Cadillacs." Gentleman Jim smiled. "As a matter of fact, I did, too."

He studied the inch-long ash on his cigar thoughtfully. "It was Willie's love for Cadillacs that sent me to the—ah—penitentiary, but I forgive him. He didn't do it intentionally. He would have cut his heart out first. But then, who can comprehend the ways of Fate? And Fate willed it that way.

"We had a big job figured, Gertie and I. The Murray Hill Trust Company. Perhaps you know it. It was slightly out of Gertie's line, but, with success, it would have meant the end of our lives of crime. We needed that money to get married on—and then it would be Hawaii, the Orient, the whole wide world that I have always wanted to see." He exhaled heavily. "But it was not to be.

"You know how those large, conservative banks operate. No guards on the floor, they're kept behind the windows. Well, I had learned that every day at two o'clock a messenger arrived from the downtown branch, carrying in a little satchel a quarter of a million in negotiable securities. Don't ask me how I found out. Heads would roll, even today, if I gave my source of information away.

"Anyway, the plan was that Gertie would drive the car—a lovely Cadillac, it

was—while I would quietly go into the bank at just the time the messenger from the downtown branch arrived. I would stick a pistol in the messenger's side and make him come outside with me, with the satchel, of course, where I would take the satchel, jump into the car, and we would be off.

"You know the old saying about 'the best-laid plans of mice and men'?" he asked. "That was how it was. Up to a point everything went off according to plan. I idled into the bank at the moment the messenger arrived. It was quiet, orderly, nothing for the bank guards, who weren't close enough to see us very accurately, to be suspicious about. The messenger walked outside with me. I seized the satchel and ran for the car. Only—there was no car there."

"How was that?" we asked.

"A combination of circumstances that would be laughed at, were it to appear in even the worst Hollywood movie. . . . You know how Gertie was—never able to resist the chance to pick up a few dollars. Right after I left the car to go in the bank, a lady passed by with her pocketbook dangling open. Gertie deserted the car—only momentarily, of course—to dip into that bag."

"But how did the car itself disappear?"

"At the moment Gertie left the car, Willie the Cadillac came along. That car

was too much for Willie. He didn't know, of course, whose it was. Willie got in the car and drove off."

"And you were left standing there . . ."

Gentleman Jim nodded sadly. "I was left standing there holding the bag. A quarter of a million dollars." He added wistfully, "It was the most money I have ever held in my hand at one time. I doubt if I shall see anything like it again."

Neither of us said anything for a long moment. Then Gentleman Jim stirred. Well," he said, "I guess those times are gone now, gone forever, along with Gertie, and Willie, and my youth. . . ."

Well, times may have deteriorated for Gentleman Jim Greenleaf, but for readers of DETECTIVE TALES no sadness need be felt. There's still high adventure, and plenty of it, to be had within the pages of good old DT, for where is the man whose blood doesn't course a little faster when he hears the word *murder*?

And that's what we specialize in: Murder! The kind that will keep you reading for 130 action-packed pages. And that's good enough for any man.

Next month's issue will feature a dramatic Hollywood crime novel by Don Mullally, ex-actors' agent turned writer, plus gripping novelettes and short stories by Francis K. Allan, Larry Holden and many others. See you June 24th.

—The Editor

LOTS OF LUCK—ALL BAD

DOUGLAS YALE was a small-time sneak-thief whose luck was so bad as to be almost unbelievable. He stole a car in 1939 and was ordered to the curb by a suspicious policeman. Well prepared for this eventuality, Yale handed the cop a business man's card, for identification, which he had found a few days before. The cop stared at the card and quickly pulled his gun. At the station house Yale found out why: The card belonged to the policeman's brother-in-law!

In 1945 Yale picked a lock box in a Chicago postoffice. As he started to walk away he dropped one of the stolen letters. A man just entering the postoffice stooped and picked up the letter. The courteous stranger was about to hand Yale the letter when he noticed to whom it was addressed, and yelled for the guards. The man who had picked up the letter was the owner of the box Yale had just rifled.

In January, 1949, he attempted to pick another lockbox in a Chicago postoffice. His picking device, a fingernail clipper, fell out of his hand and onto the stone floor. A guard heard it fall and grabbed the frightened Yale before he could move out of his tracks. As he was lead away he noticed the number on the box: 1313!

Arraigned before Federal Judge William J. Campbell, Yale refused the services of a lawyer. "I'm guilty," he said wearily, "and I want to go back to jail. That's the only place where I don't have bad luck." He got a year and a day.

—Walt Paynter.



CABOOSE COUNSELORS

By
DAVE SANDS

*Stone walls do not a prison make, nor iron bars a cage—
for the man who knows his Blackstone!*

THE ONE TYPE of escape-conscious prisoner who is never discouraged from his plotting but is actually encouraged and given the means to do so is the "prison lawyer." Every large penitentiary has one or more of these, and they are among the most respected men in the convict community.

An interesting thing about these men is that none of them ever saw the inside of a law school. Indeed, most of them are crude, little-educated men whose first contact with the law came after their apprehension for some crime.

All of them have another thing in common: unusually quick, perceptive minds that can truly instantly seize upon all the subtle implications of words found in law books. Law books make up an important part of every prison library. Convicts are allowed to borrow these and study them in the tranquility of their cells.

The prison lawyer has memorized every word of the legal process by which he was convicted and spends his free time pouring through legal tomes, ever searching for a loophole in his conviction. After a while he is bound to become quite expert in matters of criminal law and may open an informed practice of his own, dispensing advice to convicts too poor to have lawyers working for them on the outside.

Such a man was Missouri Penitentiary's Clyde Meeks. His formal schooling never passed the ninth grade, but by making good use of the prison's law library he knew as much about criminal law as any certified,

bar-association counselor in the state. Hundreds of prisoners used legal advice received from Meeks to secure lesser sentences and, in some cases, release.

After doing eight of his fifteen years as a convicted forger, Meeks finally came across what he was looking for—an error in his own conviction. He petitioned for a review of his case. This was granted and Meeks was brought to Jefferson City to argue his plea. He might have hired a court-wise attorney to conduct the actual plea, but he had sufficient confidence in his own legal ability to undertake arguing before the judge himself.

Although opposed by the crack counsel of the attorney general's office, Meeks was able to obtain his own release.

Probably the best of the prison lawyers is Cecil Wright, who successfully argued himself out of dreaded Alcatraz. Convicted of robbing a post office, Wright submitted twelve briefs to various federal courts, protesting supposed irregularities in his trial. Each of these was coldly rejected, but his thirteenth attempt took. His writ of habeas corpus, in which he pleaded he hadn't had adequate legal assistance in his trial, was granted by United States District Judge William Denman. After granting him his freedom, Judge Denman complimented Wright on his fine legal presentation.

One cannot help but wonder how far Meeks and Wright might have gone had they originally turned to law, instead of crime.



IT'S YOUR FUNERAL!

*You couldn't blame Jeff Barron for not loving cops.
For, first they told him he was dead. . . . And then
they accused him of being his own murderer!*

Suspenseful Novel of Manhattan Murder

CHAPTER ONE

Something Dead Has Been Added

THE TRAIN had already passed through Philadelphia on its swift way to New York. It was nearly midnight and the bar car was almost empty. The man across the aisle from Jeff rose and picked up his cane and went unsteadily down the aisle to the door. He was fat and soft-stomached, with a pasty

face and thick glasses, and he wheezed as he moved. For those reasons Jeff noticed him and reached over to pick up the newspaper the man had abandoned.

That was how Jeff Barron learned of his own murder.

At first the words simply floated on the surface of his understanding: "Re-



The man looked up from the paper, startled, as if he were about to speak.

porter Slain." The subhead said, "J. M. Barron of *Banner* Found Dead."

At first it crossed his mind that here was a strange coincidence—another reporter named J. M. Barron. He started to read the account, and by the time he had gone a few lines his brain ceased to

digest the message. He stared and blinked and started over. This was one of those tricks of vision, the sort of thing your ears sometimes did when, in a room alone, you seemed to hear someone calling your name. But it was no trick. It took him minutes to comprehend what he was reading.

It was last night's paper: the *New York Star*. It told that the charred body of Jeffrey Martin Barron, veteran Manhattan reporter and feature writer, until recently of the *Evening Banner*, had been discovered in the wreckage of his Ford coupe, at the bottom of Pine Hill Crevice, a deep rock crevice along the Hillmont Road above Middletown, seventy miles from New York. Discovery of the body in the burned wreckage came about when a motorist on the mountain road noticed the broken barriers that guarded the road from the edge of the sheer drop. The motorist investigated and was able to see bits of the wreckage in the moonlight. He summoned state troopers. This was about four o'clock in the morning, Thursday. The body was burned beyond recognition. Identification was established by an engraved watch, an award given to Barron for distinguished reporting in 1946. Not until the remains had been taken to Hillmont was it discovered that Barron had been shot three times, twice in the head and once in the abdomen. Until then death had been construed as accidental.

Then Jeff found himself reading details about himself: Thirty-two years old, unmarried. . . . At one time a promising baseball player. . . . Born on New York's upper West side, had known the city well. . . . A colorful reporter and relentless legman, his volatile temper had brought him many clashes, the latest only two months ago when he was fired from the *Evening Banner* after charging the publishers with incompetence, dishonesty, and lack of courage. Thereafter he announced his intention of writing a book or play. Police confessed that they were at a loss for the motive. . . .

HE GLANCED up as the train roared into the tunnel below the Hudson, and the sound swelled in his ears. He looked around him with the feeling that

he had lost touch with this scene and place and had been dreaming. The waiter was gathering the last glasses off the stands. The girl with dark hair was standing up, gathering her purse and gloves. Two men at the end of the car were shaking hands and one was saying, "Been nice meeting you. Any day you've got time, look me up in Boston."

Jeff turned his eyes back to the newspaper, half believing that the words would have vanished and the dream would be ended. But the words were still there: "Reporter Slain." For an instant he wanted to laugh. It was like a joke, not very funny, but crazy-queer. Yet he did not laugh.

He went back to his seat in the coach and sat down. Maybe it was the liquor, he thought. Maybe getting out of the bar car would help him back to reality. It didn't, though. For the man in the seat opposite Jeff was reading the same headline Jeff had read. And he was staring peculiarly at Jeff, as though he was about to speak.

The train stopped then, and Jeff grabbed up his coat, hat and grip before the man could say anything. He ducked out of the train and started up the stairs into Pennsylvania Station. There he paused a moment. Was there anyone here he knew? Would someone perhaps recognize him?

He pulled down his hat low. This was something that could stand a little thinking. He walked swiftly out to Seventh Avenue. It was a cool March night and the wind was laden with moisture. He pulled on his light topcoat and paused at a newsstand to buy three of the latest papers. The humor of it struck him as he walked off—a guy getting the latest word on his own murder. . . .

In a back booth of a drab little bar on Thirty-third Street, Jeff ordered a bourbon and opened the *Star*. There were two photos, one of the burned twisted wreckage of his Ford, with a white arrow pointing to a limp arm and shoulder that dangled from the crushed front seat; the second photo was of Jeff three years before: black curly hair, dark blue eyes, a lean face that might be sardonic or kindly or both. Above the photo was the one word: Murdered.

Mainly, the story was a rehash of the earlier one Jeff had read, but there were additions. Marylyn Warren, an actress friend of the murdered man, had revealed that Jeff Barron had phoned her late Wednesday night and told her he planned to be out of town for several days; he did not reveal his plans or destination. Miss Warren, when interviewed by New York detectives, was unable to shed any light on the motive for the crime. She was overcome by grief.

Harry Barello, aged twenty-two, the night attendant at the River Garage, where Barron regularly parked his car, asserted that the murdered man had come to the garage around one o'clock in the morning Thursday, approximately three hours before he was found dead. It was raining and cold, Barello said, and Barron was dressed in a raincoat and rain-soaked hat when he called for his car. Barello was positive that it was Barron who took the car. They chatted for a moment, he said, and then Barron flipped a coin for 'four bits or nothin' tip, as was his almost un-failing custom.

George Dundee, elevator operator at Barron's apartment building on West Sixty-fifth, advised detectives that Barron had left his apartment on the seventh floor and taken the elevator down around midnight or a little after; he had been carrying an overnight case at that time, the charred remains of which had been found in the wrecked automobile. . . .

Detectives admitted that they were still at a loss to uncover any substantial motive for the murder. Friends of the dead man in various walks of life, had been questioned; many described him as unpredictable and, at times, difficult. He was, admittedly, a capable and often brilliant reporter. His private life was not thought to be unusual. He was a moderately heavy drinker. He lived alone and knew a multitude of people, yet not many knew him closely. He was in modest circumstances financially, and robbery was discounted as a motive. Since leaving the Evening *Banner* he had led a come-and-go existence, friends assumed he was working on a play or book. Miss Warren stated that she had not seen him in over a week. There were no close relatives who might . . .

JEFF folded the newspaper together and for a while stared at the headlines. Finally he finished his beer, ordered another, and opened the *Banner*. Roscoe had given him the works: five photos of the death car, one of the torn-down rails at the edge of the cliff, another of the sheet-covered figure in the Hillmont morgue. The story itself was virtually a rewrite of the *Star* account. The same was true of the *Beacon*.

Jeff sat there for five beers and countless cigarettes. It was still too fantastic for him to swallow: Marylyn and the phone call. . . . The kid at the garage, and then George on the elevator. . . . But more than anything else was the curious sensation of unreality that hit him when he stared at the wreckage of his Ford and saw the twisted arm that dangled from the seat. His . . .

He opened and closed his fingers again, and slowly a grim smile came across his lips. This was something new and different in feeling yourself dead, seeing it, reading it, wondering who had killed you, and asking yourself why. . . .

His thoughts banged to a stop, and he went back suddenly. There was something wrong with that thinking. Maybe no one had tried to kill *him*. There were too many coincidences that couldn't have happened: the phone call to Marylyn, the garage thing, the elevator.

It must have been this way, he thought: Someone had phoned Marylyn and given *his* name feigned *his* voice. Someone had bundled up in a raincoat and limp hat and fooled the kid at the garage; the place was always two-thirds dark after midnight, anyway. But the someone had known about the 'four bits or nothing' deal, so it meant that the someone was a guy who'd been to the garage with Jeff. . . .

Jeff breathed softly and swiftly. The affair was turning into a nice little game, not one you'd play with grandma, but one you'd stay and see for the finish.

It must have been this way, he figured: Someone had done the fooling, taken the Ford, driven upstate to the Hillmont Road, and then . . . *And then somebody got himself murdered!* The body hadn't been an hallucination. It was in the Hillmont morgue now, under a name that was not its own.

Jeff didn't want any more beer. He paid his check and started out. As he passed the front lights he quickly pulled down his hat. In the cold windy night he paused. Where, he wondered ironically, should a dead man go? Not home; it would excite the nice people. A dead man went off into some little corner, very quietly, and tried to figure out why he was dead. Even a corpse deserved a chance to think. . . .

He walked a couple of blocks east before he decided it was the wrong direction. Too close to Broadway. He turned back west and walked slowly. At the intersection he loitered and looked back. No one seemed to be following. He thought of the pasty-faced fat man in the bar car, and he looked again.

On Ninth Avenue he walked uptown until he found a small, plain hotel called the Macklin. The lobby was shadowy, with a few worn chairs, a closed cigar counter, a bar that was closing, a sleepy elderly clerk. Jeff signed for a room: William Jefferson.

It was on the fourth floor overlooking Ninth. It was square and dead white and utterly impersonal. A blind mouse would go crazy here in a month, Jeff thought.

He took off his clothes, perched the ashtray on the bed beside him, turned out the light and started thinking. He began with the week before, trying to get a perspective. One week before he had walked out of his apartment, disgusted and discouraged with the play he was trying to write. He had taken a train to Chicago, rented a room in a hotel that was enough like this one to be its hungry brother, and for the entire week he had walked the Loop and wandered through Cicero and smelled and looked and drunk, trying to get the feel of a Chicago scene in his play. He had seen no one he knew in Chicago; he'd never been in the hotel before; he'd registered as J. M. Barron, which meant nothing to them. And, while he was not certain, he could not remember telling anyone in New York that he was even thinking of going to Chicago.

There was the background—innocent as a baby's kiss. But somebody had done some fooling—stolen his car, used the double-or-nothing tip phrase. So the somebody was someone he knew, someone who'd been to the garage with him, surely.

And somebody was dead. Who? Whose corpse wore another name in Hillmont? And why? Maybe tomorrow would open it up a little more. The papers Abruptly he snapped on the light and grabbed the papers again. There it was: Funeral services for the slain reporter had been arranged by his friends for two o'clock the next afternoon at The Gentle Lady Chapel, East Forty-ninth Street.

Slowly Jeff lay down again. It would make a nice story to tell the kiddies by the fireside some day. . . . He lay still and stared at his glowing cigarette. It was a long time before Jeff went to sleep.

CHAPTER TWO

His Own Funeral

THE NEXT DAY was cool and clear. There were a number of things to do.

After breakfast he shopped in a drug-store. Back in his room at the Macklin, he read the directions on the bottle of bleach, then filled the basin. He took out the scissors and gave himself a crew-cut, then shaved his neck. He used the bleach on his head, brows, arms and hands. He stuffed cotton in his nostrils; it made it hard as the devil to breathe, but it changed his looks and voice. Finally he put on the thick glasses with the wide dark rims. That did it. He looked like pictures he'd seen of Prussian army officers. Finally, he packed the bleach and scissors, pulled out the cotton, took off the glasses, pulled down his hat and moved out of the Macklin. He walked two blocks up Ninth, put the glasses on again, restored the cotton to his nose, and three blocks further uptown he found the Aristocrat Hotel. It was a shabbier cousin of the Macklin.

He made another shopping trip, this time to a new-and-second-hand clothing store. He bought a used black suit that looked as if it had been made of re-processed iron. He bought a Homburg hat.

The sunlight departed just before two o'clock. The sky descended and the wind turned colder. The Gentle Lady Chapel was a narrow grey building sandwiched between drab apartment houses. Cars and cabs were arriving. A shiny hearse was parked in front and a cop strolled

languidly back and forth, flipping his stick.

Presently the influx ceased. It was ten minutes after two. Jeff walked slowly across the street and opened the heavy door. They were singing. The long high-domed room was thick with shadows, save where candles burned at the closed casket. Too bad it had to be closed, Jeff mused.

He slipped unobtrusively into the back row. He did not know the priest. They were praying for him and Jeff found himself following the chant with his own lips before he caught himself.

He was surprised at the number of people here. There were faces he only faintly remembered, names he could not recall. He saw Big Moe, who'd been acquitted of Henzel's murder; Jeff had covered the trial, and Big Moe had put on a good show. Big Moe looked very serious and sad now. Jeff told himself that one of these days he'd look Moe up and have a drink with him.

He saw Marylyn. In the candlelight her face was more beautiful than he had ever imagined. Her hair was the pale softness of blown gold. Some day he'd have to tell her how lovely she'd looked just now; and for a moment he yearned to whisper to her not to cry. And it was quite strange: As he thought of it, she lifted her head as though she had heard a sound, and she turned and seemed to listen anxiously.

He saw Pat Weston, the prize fight czar, big and bald and broken nosed. He saw Cary Anders, the Broadway producer, lean and dark and unreadable. Jeff had never decided whether he hated Cary or liked him. He wondered what Cary was thinking.

There were others: Benedict, the hatchet man who'd fired him from the *Banner*—the marvel of science, the man who felt nothing. And Tom Marsh, the playboy with all the money and just enough happy brain to remember the way to a martini. Jeff remembered the night Ted had gotten so drunk and cried all his troubles. . . .

His mind was pulled back to the present by the words of the priest. He was saying what a fine man, what a warm friend Jeffrey Barron had been to all. Jeff smiled.

They rose to sing again. Jeff kept looking at the faces. Someone had posed as him, someone who'd known of the tip thing at the garage. A friend. Someone in this room, very likely. The murderer, attending the funeral of Mr. X, whose real name was known only to him.

The congregation prayed the last time. And as the prayer went on and on, the flow of solemn words began to lull Jeff strangely. He closed his eyes and it crossed his mind that this could be an immense fantasy in which he was actually dead. How did you know you were gone? Perhaps you lingered a while, sometimes, not really sure what to do, where to go. Maybe there was a waiting period while the red tape got straightened out.

Was he dead or was he alive?

ABRUPTLY he opened his eyes. Perspiration was on his face and he felt breathless. For an instant he couldn't remember what all this was. How long had he been here? The funeral was over. The casket was gone. People were coming up the aisle, past him and out the doors. They were speaking softly. One or two of them seemed to stare at him stonily, as though he puzzled them or annoyed them. He saw Marylyn's golden hair as she moved up the aisle. He turned clumsily and pressed into the crowd moving outward.

In the push at the door he knocked a purse from someone's hand. It spilled the contents on the floor and the crowd started kicking them. He bent down quickly and scooped the contents back in the purse.

"Fast and easy always does it," he said. "Sorry I—"

His lips froze. He was staring into the brilliant blue eyes of little Wendy Logan of the society page of the *Banner*. Her face had turned white. Her lips were moving. Though they made scarcely a sound, Jeff heard her echoing: "Fast and easy always . . ."

It was a phrase he'd used a million times. She had heard it a thousand times. She kept staring at him with something akin to terror.

"Sorry about the purse, lady," he said in a thick, blunt voice. He blundered out the door and strode hurriedly toward Lexington Avenue. He wanted a drink and

he wanted it fast. That, he told himself, was the last one of his funerals he wanted to go to for a long time.

He went into a bar and ordered a straight rye. He tossed it and got another. This one he drank slowly. He mopped his damp face and put a cigarette between his lips. He struck a match. Just as he raised his cupped hands, he saw the scene of the barroom in the long mirror beyond the bar.

He saw Wendy Logan. Her eyes were vast and fixed on his back. Her face was bloodless. Her throat was throbbing. Jeff could not move. The match burned as he stared, transfixed, at her reflection. And then her eyes met his in the mirror and in that instant all was naked and revealed.

Wendy screamed. The piercing sound seemed to cut the roof apart. Jeff spun around. Someone dropped a glass. Wendy stumbled and thrust out her hand as if to fend away from her a ghastly vision. Then she simply crumpled to the floor, unconscious.

The bartender began to bawl out frantic advice. Jeff plunged for the door. This time he did not pause until he reached Times Square. His nerves were shattered. He had another rye, and a third and fourth.

Cold rain had begun to fall, and it was almost dark when he left the bar. The whiskey lapped warmly against the sides of his stomach and the interlude of the candle-lit chapel seemed like a miniature dream from the almost-forgotten past. That was a nice thing about whiskey: It pushed things back in their places and let you stand off and laugh at them. He was half sorry about Wendy—first for frightening her, and second for letting her recognize him at all. But there was just a chance she'd be too dismayed to tell. Whatever happened, it was done; the fat was going to bake or burn anyway. In fact, he might even phone her and tell her the deal was cockeyed. Wendy was a nice kid; she'd keep her mouth shut, if there was a reason. He should have played it that way from the beginning.

Might even call her now. Have another drink and call her. That was it. Very simple. Whiskey made things very simple.

He straightened his tie and walked into the first bar he came to. He would have another drink first. First things first, he thought.

"A bit of rye to ease the rain," he advised the bartender.

"Yeah. But don't start singing songs."

I am creating the impression that I am drunk, he told himself solemnly. Very reasonable, however. I am drinking to ease the sadness of my death. Later I think I *will* sing. I . . .

His silent soliloquy halted. He squinted, closed his eyes, then opened them slowly. There was a thin shabby man down at the end of the bar. He was nothing to look at: pale face, drab brown hair, listless eyes, a glass of beer in front of him. Jeff would not have thought of him twice except for one reason: That man had also been in the bar where Wendy had fainted.

Or had he? Jeff raised his glass and took another look as he drank. He caught the man glancing at him momentarily. Jeff did not know the man, and yet he had a strange sensation that he had seen a distorted portion of the face before—not today, but some other day, some other place, somewhere that . . .

It hit him suddenly and he almost spilled the drink. He held onto the bar and got a deep breath before, very carefully, he studied the man's nose and the cleft of his chin and the flabby line of his throat; and then Jeff was certain: *That thin man was the fat wheezing man who had left the newspaper in the bar car of the train!*

The can was gone. The stomach padding was gone. The glasses were gone. But the features of the face were the same, unchangeable.

JEFF ordered another drink and made it wait while he thought about Mr. Fat-and-Thin. Mr. Fat-and-Thin should be an interesting man to talk to. Confidential talk. In a quiet place.

Jeff finished his drink, shook the rain from his hat and departed without haste. Two blocks south, at a corner, Jeff saw the man across the street, a hundred feet behind. Jeff turned west in the direction of the Aristocrat Hotel. The man came west, too. At Ninth Avenue Jeff lost sight of him. He studied a display window for

several minutes, then went north slowly. But the man had vanished. Jeff swore softly, then stopped.

The man had probably followed him from the train to the Macklin and thence to the Aristocrat, he realized. He knew where Jeff was staying and had decided, from Jeff's direction, that he was on his way home to the Aristocrat.

Jeff tried it out. He returned to the Aristocrat and looked through the lobby and the bar. Then he bought a paper and settled himself in a chair. An hour later, at six-thirty, he glimpsed the man as he came down—not in the elevator, but by the stairs at the side. The man skirted the lobby inconspicuously and dissolved into the night. He had looked, Jeff told himself, exactly like a man in a hurry to get somewhere.

Jeff got up fast and went out the side door. The man was crossing Ninth Avenue and heading uptown, his head bent and his hat pulled low against the rain. At Forty-sixth he turned east. Past Eighth Avenue he vanished into the darkness of a narrow passage between two buildings. One housed a cafeteria on the ground floor and the other was plastered with theatrical advertisements and For Lease signs. It was vacant.

Jeff stood in the shelter of a doorway across the street and watched. The rain came in fitful gusts and the lights of Times Square threw a fiery glow against the low clouds. People poured in and out of the cafeteria. A mounted policeman, huddled in his raincoat, walked his horse back and forth. The lights were on in the theater lobbies down the block.

A long time had passed, Jeff realized. He squinted at his watch; it was nearly eight. Traffic grew heavier around the theaters. At last, impatient, Jeff crossed the street and walked slowly into the depths of the dark passage. It dead-ended against the solid brick wall of a building that faced on Forty-fifth. On the right were several trash cans and empty boxes, stacked near the kitchen door of the cafeteria. He tested the door lightly; it was locked.

He turned to the vacant building and struck a match. Its heavy rear door was sheltered from the rain and it was dry, but the old metal knob was wet where a

wet hand had grasped it. Jeff tried it and the door opened. The odor of dust filled his nostrils. The sounds of traffic faded as he closed the door.

He stood still, listening intently. He felt his way along a rough wall to an inner door. The traffic sounds vanished entirely. The odor of the dust grew older. The methodical gnawing of a rat was the only sound to be heard. Jeff struck another match.

At first he was blinded. Then his eyes adjusted themselves. He saw Mr. Fat-and-Thin, and the whiskey spun around his stomach.

Mr. Fat-and-Thin lay on the dusty floor of the empty room. He lay face down, arms outstretched beyond his head, one bony leg twisted under him. And the back of his skull had been smashed in.

Jeff's match went out. He remembered to breathe again. The rat went on with his gnawing. Finally Jeff picked another match from the book and knelt down.

"Fast and easy always does it," he murmured, "says one corpse to the other."

CHAPTER THREE

Corpse Confusion

THE MAN'S NAME had been Thomas Vestley. There was an old Equity card in his dog-eared billfold and a couple of yellowed clippings from 1933 and 1934 when Vestley had been playing in something called *Great Magic*; he'd been the butler. There were four pawn tickets of recent date and about forty dollars in cash. There was a match book from a café in Chicago. The poor devil had taken the whole trip with him, Jeff realized.

Finally, there was the tag-and-key to Room 419 at the Aristocrat Hotel. Jeff hesitated momentarily, then thrust it into his pocket. He looked around. The death instrument was gone. He explored half a dozen of the vacant rooms before giving it up. The rat had stopped chewing. Jeff let himself out into the dark passage again. The rain stung his face. He moved into the tide of people hurrying toward the theaters, then caught a cab as it discharged its passengers.

Fifteen minutes later he stood in the fourth-floor corridor of the Aristocrat

Hotel and listened for a sound beyond the door of 419. He fitted the key, slipped into the room and shut the door quietly. He moved swiftly, driven by the feeling that time was stolen.

He lowered the shade and snapped on the light. The room was almost exactly like his own. A worn suitcase was pushed against the wall. It held the suit Thomas Vestley had worn on the train, and the glasses. Also broad strips of a torn sheet and safety pins: This was the once-fat stomach. There were a few other clothes, cigarettes and a half-pint of cheap whiskey. There was nothing else.

Jeff felt baffled and cheated. He listened for sounds in the corridor, then snapped out the light and left the room, locking the door. The afternoon whiskey had lost its warmth and he felt sticky and cold. He started to his own room, changed his mind, started down to the bar, and again changed his mind and went across the street to another bar.

He tried to fit the pieces and get the picture. Obviously Vestley had followed him to Chicago, then trailed him back to New York, from hotel to hotel, from funeral to bar to bar and then toward the Aristocrat. There, apparently, Vestley had . . . what? Gotten a message? Reported to someone? One or both. Then he'd hurried to the vacant building where someone had murdered him. Obviously Vestley hadn't made the trip with the intention of getting himself killed. Vestley had gone to meet someone he trusted. Why had he been killed? Probably because his work was done; the murderer had disposed of him because he knew too much. Vestley had been stupid or too trusting or both. At any rate, he had done his gumshoe routine and now he was dead.

Indecision and restlessness seized Jeff. There was a pattern, he knew, but what came next? What was the *reason* for the murders? He left his drink and returned to the Aristocrat. A plan—still vague and shadowy—was teasing his brain. Vestley had followed him, and doubtless reported. Now what would the murderer do with the information?

He made up his mind and walked up to the desk. He would like a room for a friend of his who was arriving late tonight. A room adjoining his, if possible.

He was meeting this friend, see, and it would be very late. He got it.

He pocketed the key and went out for the latest papers. There was only a brief account of his funeral, and a statement that the police were still engaged in sifting the possible motives. It was not the last paper of the night.

He went upstairs and down the corridor, past his room, to the room next door. He let himself in and sat down in an arm chair. Maybe something would happen. Time dragged and he began to ask himself what he was waiting for, why he was waiting, what he would do when it happened, whatever it was. He prowled the room and swore at the silence, then at the noise from the street. Countless times he went to the wall and listened, unbreathing.

This was the way guys went nuts, he told himself. He sat down and counted. He thought of the funeral, and then he started working on the idea that just maybe he was dead. That same thing, silly and crazy and impossible, but how did you know?

You know because you'd seen a dead man named Vestley. Because your car had been stolen and wrecked and a guy—some poor unknown guy—had been in it. You knew because you were playing cat-and-mouse with a murderer, and you ought to have every inch of your head examined.

AT MIDNIGHT he went out and brought in the final papers. There was the same story on the funeral about the well-beloved reporter who was dead. But there was also a bold-faced item about Winifred 'Wendy' Logan, who had collapsed in a Lexington Avenue bar and been taken to her apartment. Incoherent and semi-hysterical, she had kept insisting that she had seen the dead man—first at his own funeral, and later in the bar. She was under the care of her physician. . . .

Because there was nothing else to do, Jeff kept reading the paper. That was how he found the piece on an inside sheet, buried with the department store ads. It told that a man named Horace Page, aged thirty-four, of West Ninety-fourth Street, Manhattan, had been reported missing by his wife. He had been gone for nearly four days. Of average size, weighing

about a hundred and seventy pounds, dark hair and eyes. Page had left home late in the evening with the announced intention of taking a walk; he had not been seen since, so far as was known. Page, a foreman for a construction company, had once been employed as a companion and bodyguard to Ted Marsh, multi-millionaire heir to the railroad fortune, and man-about-Manhattan.

Slowly Jeff put down the paper and stared at the drab wall. His memory was reaching backward to a night two years before when Ted Marsh had gotten quite drunk, so drunk that the crawling things had come to torment him and silence had been a torture too agonizing to endure. Jeff had taken him home, to his, Jeff's apartment, that night. He had listened to Ted trying to talk it out. What was it Ted had said?

It came back in fragments: "You guys . . . You and a lot of guys think I've had it lucky. I can tell you something. Something you won't believe and you'll say I'm drunk. I don't care what you say. Listen, Jeff: Since I was a kid—a little kid—my old man thought I was going to hell, and he wanted to make me fly right. He had a gardener on the place, and the gardener had a kid. Horace. Horace Page, Jeff. My old man wanted me to get the other side of life, like the gardener's kid. From the time I was six years old and Horace was about ten, Horace was a damned shadow over my shoulder. My old man *paid* him, see? To watch me and beat hell out of me if I got sassy or stuck-up. My old man started on a road gang, see, and he said the hell with a kid of his who was sassy. But what I'm getting at, Jeff. The thing I'm trying to tell you is about this guy named Horace. Listen, Jeff: The reason I sometimes drink is to work up my nerve to kill Horace. I know exactly where he lives—which street and floor and apartment. Some day I'm going to get drunk enough to kill him. And the reason it's funny is that I know he's thinking that same thing right this minute. We always wanted to kill each other.

"Listen, Jeff, this kid Horace, he caught on fast, even when he was ten. He got it figured that he was hired because I was a little rat. And he figured that the way to get ahead on the deal was to make me a

bigger rat—but make it look like *me*, see. The flowers would get messed up—okay, I did it. My old man believed him because he was a poor kid, like my old man had been, and I was a rich kid like my old man hated, really. After the flowers, it was a couple of bucks snatched off the dresser, or a bottle of Scotch in Prohibition. The little jackass got smarter every year, and the old man got to hating me more every minute. When I opened my mouth, the old man damn near blew his top. Then I quit trying to explain. Horace would rig some deal on me, and I'd just take it and dream of the day when Horace would be dead. When I would kill him, see, Jeff? Then the worst came.

"I had a girl, Jeff, when I was maybe eighteen. It was crazy, but then it was something wonderful and sweet. Horace busted that apart. Then my old man died, and it was over. He left Horace a lot of money for all he'd done for me. The money was in stock in one of my old man's outfits. Horace left it there and I got to thinking about it. I owned most of the stock in the same outfit. You know what I did, Jeff? I broke the company. I hired the best crooked lawyer in New York and we busted the company. It cost me twenty times what it cost Horace, but it cost him the last penny he had. And he knows I did it, Jeff! Right this minute he's sweating his soul out, thinking of the money he doesn't have because of me. He hates me. He'd love to kill me.

"But I didn't make any profit out of the life, Jeff. I hate him because he stole the happy years and the first sweet girl I'd ever known. I hate him because his lies made me a sneaky, yellow rich kid, see? I've tried to get serious and get jobs and quit the champagne circuit. God knows, I never was smart, but I'm not a thief or a dozen other things. But people think I am. I'm just the guy in the paper hat, with too many bucks and a heart the shape of a peanut. So you want to know why I like to get drunk? I like to get drunk and dream of the day—no, the night—*night*, Jeff! The night I'll kill Page! I've never told this to anybody before. But sometimes it swells inside me until I want to scream and yell it out: I want to kill Horace Page, and some day, believe me, I *will* kill him!"

JEFF kept staring at the wall, though he didn't see it at all. He could not have explained what he was thinking. He scarcely understood it himself. It was only the meeting point of two strangely distant pieces, yet pieces that once flourished in hate. And yet there was no actual meeting at all, only in Jeff's brain. Horace Page and Ted Marsh . . . The lust to kill . . . Page was missing, and a corpse wore a name that was not its own.

Jeff shook his head groggily. It didn't fit. Ted wasn't smart enough to fit coins in a slot machine.

Suddenly his nerves leaped into focus. He listened, half in and half out of his chair. Quietly he rose and tiptoed to the wall. He heard nothing, yet now he was certain he *had* heard something—the click of the latch. Perhaps someone had been going *out!* He hadn't heard them enter!

He opened the door and glanced into the corridor. He rushed to the head of the stairs. He looked down. He saw nothing. Then, just as he started to turn away, he saw a hand gliding down the railing three flights below—a man's hand, moving swiftly and quietly. As if—as if in stealth, Jeff thought.

He bolted down the steps just as the hand disappeared on the enclosed lobby exit. But the time he reached the lobby only the shadows, the dim lights and the clerk were there. He rushed out to the street. A cab was growling into high gear. It turned east, and there was no other cab for Jeff.

There wasn't time to curse. He ran back through the lobby and up the stairs to his own room. He snapped on the light and leaned back against the door, panting and staring around him. Why had the man come here? What had he done in here?

The dresser was the same. The closet was bare. His suitcase? It was the same: the grey suit, shirts, nothing gone or . . . His fingers froze on the small, hard lump inside the worn lining of the suitcase. He worked the lump to the binding and a ring rolled out into the suitcase.

It was a man's wedding ring. Plain gold, thick, and wide. And inside the band were the two initials: H. P.

H. P. as in Horace Page, Jeff was thinking in one cold corner of his brain.

And in the burned car was the broken watch that identified Jeff. Now, just suppose the corpse had had a ring, a ring with the initials, H. P. that wouldn't fit with Jeff Barron. So the person behind all this removes the ring. Then the ring comes home to roost somewhere. Why?

Jeff glanced at his watch. It hadn't been more than ten minutes since the guy had pulled out of here. Ted lived on Park near Eighty-fifth Street. If it had been Ted, he couldn't be home yet.

It took Jeff less than two minutes to reach a phone booth across the street. The voice that answered belonged to Ted Marsh.

"Hello? Hello?" There was a long pause while Jeff tried to decide what to do. Ted decided for him. "This is Marsh," Ted said in a dry voice. "Nobody is here, if you're ready to talk."

"Do you know who this is?" Jeff asked experimentally.

"No." Marsh's voice sounded old and sleepless.

"But you were expecting me to call?"

"For God's sake, stop baiting and say it, whatever it is!" This time the haggard desperation broke through the voice, and it was the Ted Marsh that Jeff understood: not so smart, not so happy, not very clear about what was happening; just a guy with nothing but money and, sour as it sounded, that wasn't enough in this world.

"Ted," Jeff spoke softly, "this isn't the call you were expecting, believe me. This is someone—call it a friend and you're not wrong. Answer me honestly: Are you in trouble about something concerning Page?"

Moments drained by. "Listen, who is this?" Ted asked raggedly.

"Is it blackmail, Ted?" Jeff persisted.

"Listen, I . . . Listen, I'm going crazy. . . ." His voice broke and he sobbed. "Who is it?"

Slowly Jeff pulled in a long breath. "Ted, listen very carefully to what I'm saying: Keep your mouth shut. Put on your hat and take a walk. Look behind you and get rid of the guy who might be there. After that, wander into Central Park at the Ninety-fifth Street cross-town and a friend of yours will happen along. Do it now and don't worry, Ted. This is

a friend, believe me. A good friend, Ted."
Jeff hung up before Ted could answer.

CHAPTER FOUR

Blackmail Boy

THE RAIN was heavier and the wind hurled it under Jeff's pulled-down hat and drove it against his cheeks. He tried to see what time it was. He couldn't tell. How long had he been waiting: half an hour? An hour? What was keeping Ted?

He moved back and forth along the path just within the park. He was cold. Footsteps approached slowly. It was a cop. Jeff stood back in the blackness of the hedges. The footsteps faded. The rain continued. How long had it been? Where in hell was Ted? What had . . .

Then Ted appeared—tall and stoop-shouldered, blond and ghostly faced. He turned into the park and glanced over his shoulder. He started one way, then another, moving with the jerky uncertainty of a desperate man. Jeff called out softly. Ted spun around and stared into the dark.

"Don't get excited," Jeff said, walking toward him. "This is Jeff. Hello, Ted." He held out his hand. They were not a foot apart when Ted understood him. A soft, strangled sound of disbelief caught in his throat.

"We're going to walk, Ted," Jeff said. "We're going to talk while we walk. If a cop walks by, we don't want any."

"I . . . But today . . . I went to your—"

"It was mine, and it wasn't mine. A case of corpse confusion, Ted, and all of it with a purpose. I think you're in it. Why were you late? Did something happen? The call you were expecting?"

"I had to take the money. He wanted it right then. He phoned just after you did, and I had to take it right then, he said."

"Go slowly. Start with the first dance and tell me about it, Ted."

"It's about Horace Page. You remember Page. I told you once . . ."

"You told me. So?"

"Then this guy called—the guy who wanted the money. He said Page was dead, said he'd been murdered, and was I sure I hadn't done it? I didn't get it.

I mean, I thought it was a crazy joke, maybe even Page pulling it. The guy said not to laugh until I took a look around my bedroom. Look good, he said, and keep my mouth shut; he'd call back and we'd see if something couldn't be arranged. That was the first I knew, Jeff. And I couldn't believe it was anything but a joke."

"What did you find in your bedroom?" Jeff asked swiftly.

"First I found the .32 revolver that I always keep down at the summer place in the mountains. Three of the chambers were empty. I knew I hadn't brought the gun to Manhattan. Then, in the same drawer with the gun I found two photographs of Horace Page. He was dead, Jeff. You could see the bullet holes in his head and the blood on the floor. And the place—the room—was in the little bar-room up at my place in the mountains! You understand me? Real pictures of a dead man in my summer house!"

"And then came another phone call?"

"Yes, in just a few minutes. It was the same voice. He started off telling me to remember how I'd hated Page and wanted to kill him. He brought in the party a couple of weeks ago at Milo Beakes' place on Long Island. He said for me to think about that very seriously."

"What happened at Beakes' party?" Jeff demanded.

"I got drunk and things got in a mess. It was my fault again. A lot of people you know were there: Big Moe and Marylyn and Cary Anders and a bunch like that, and in the middle of it I got sloppy. The way it started, Moe brought some fresh kid prizefighter down, and the kid didn't like my nose or something, and then he heard I had a yacht and stuff like that, and he started sounding off about rich jellyrolls and stuffed shirts. I got mad, and the next I knew the kid was slapping me around. He hung me a couple of times before they pulled him off. After that . . . I was groggy and drunk, sure, and I felt terrible. I did that same thing I did with you once. I started trying to tell some crazy ex-actor named Vestley—"

"You what? Vestley! Go on," Jeff prompted.

"I'm trying to tell you. This Vestley

was just a sad somebody that was hanging around Cary Anders, trying to get a bit part in some play. But after I felt so lousy, I got to trying to tell him about Page and how I hated Page and how Page was a rat and I was going to kill him some day. I was talking too loud. I was groggy, see, Jeff, and I didn't give a damn. After a while somebody made me shut up, and then Milo made me take a shower and go to bed, before he called the crazy wagon, he said. And that was a couple of weeks ago at Long Island, see?

"This guy on the phone told me to remember that party. He said there were twenty people who'd heard me say I was going to kill Page. Then he said, Wasn't my gun registered in my name down in Miami, and how about the photographs of the body at my summer place? He said it wasn't going to be very easy to explain, if it ever got out in the open."

"I see. And right there was where you decided you hadn't wanted to kill Page, after all."

TED made a hopeless gesture as he stumbled along. "No, I *had* wanted to kill, but inside me I'd always known I didn't have the guts, and I'd never do it. I'd just get drunk and talk about it, like I just get drunk and talk about all the other things I'll never do. I never do anything, Jeff. I just sit down and wish, and then I take another drink, and after a while it's another day. I don't know, I don't know where I'm going. . . ."

"You're not the only one," Jeff said. "Go on. The guy said he could put the heat on you, or take it off—always for a price, of course. You wanted the heat off at any price. Go on."

"He said a hundred thousand dollars." Jeff whistled softly. "In bills no bigger than hundreds. He said get it ready and he'd be calling me again. He said naturally I'd want to handle this delicately and without a lot of noise. And if I played right he'd arrange for another murderer. He sort of chuckled and said he'd already picked his man."

Jeff made a wry face in the dark. "The guy is hell on little details, isn't he? But you paid the money tonight?"

"Yes. Right after you called. He phoned and told me to take a walk up

Madison Avenue on the west side of the street. The money was to be in a shoe box wrapped in a newspaper. I was to drop it in the trash can that had a white rag tied on it, then keep going straight up Madison. I did what he said."

"Did you see the guy?"

"No. I looked back, but he was staying out of sight."

"How about his voice? Familiar?"

"I couldn't tell. He was making it different, I knew—sort of thick and stuffed up. I don't know . . . God, I need a drink," he said raggedly. "There ought to be a bar open somewhere."

"Maybe," Jeff said thoughtfully, "if you . . . This Vestley guy that you spilled the soup to—he was with Cary Anders that night?" he asked suddenly.

"Yes. Used to be an actor and he was trying to get another—"

"And Cary's musical is at the theater next—" Jeff whistled at a lonely cab as it went by. "Don't say anything except about the weather on this ride," he warned Ted. "Hurry." They crawled into the cab. "Forty-sixth Street," Jeff told the driver. "We're looking for a place, and I think it's between Broadway and Eighth. Drive slow when you get there."

"Anything, Mack." The cabby softened the radio. "You heard about that reporter named Barron? Fellow was supposed to be dead, you know?"

Jeff took a hard grip on Ted's arm. "No. What about him?" he asked.

"First there was a story come out that somebody—a gal—saw him at his own funeral. Even followed him and saw him taking a drink at a saloon. Scared her so she fainted. Next some guy in a hotel called the Macklin went beating it into the police station, waving a picture-paper of the guy and swearing the guy had been in his hotel just yesterday, and damn sure not dead, either. I guess that must of got the cops looking again. Forty-sixth, you say, Mack?"

"Yes." Jeff ran his tongue across his lips. "What's the latest word on Barron?"

"The cops are saying for sure it ain't Barron—the dead guy, I mean. This all-night disc jockey had a load on it, last news break, and says they opened the casket and got a dentist to look at the

teeth, and he said no—not Barron. Then the jockey says they got a line on who it *really* is. Didn't say how, I guess the cops wouldn't let him say exactly. . . . Anything along here what you're looking for, Mack?"

"Slow," Jeff said. They passed the cafeteria, then the dark passage where Vestley had gone to die. Next came the building where his corpse was hidden. And next . . . Next to that vacant building, squarely against it, was the Regal Theater where Cary Anders' musical, *Torch Song*, was playing.

"That's where Cary's—" Ted started restlessly.

"Yeah," Jeff broke in harshly. "But I guess this isn't what we want. You can let us off at Grand Central."

"Anything, Mack, anything," the driver said placidly. "But the way I've been figuring it out is like this: This guy Barron, first he lost his job, and it says he's been writing a play. Well, anybody that would write plays would do most anything, the way I see it, and so this Barron is out of a job and likely needing a buck. He gets to thinking, and maybe he's got an idea how to hit a jackpot somewhere. Maybe a stickup, maybe a blackmail pitch. Anything. But maybe, also, he knows folks will realize it's him pulling this deal. So he gets the big idea of building it up to look like he's dead. That way nobody'll think it's him, see? He figures to get the dough and drift along—maybe Mexico or California and just sit in the sunshine playing the horses or such. That's the way I see it. He got himself a corpse, murdering some poor guy to get it, and next he'll start his play for the dough, you watch. Only now the cops know he ain't dead. Something slipped, but he's already into the deal so far that he figures, I guess—"

"Listen! Listen!" Ted began loudly. "The way this guy explains—"

"Shut up, you crazy—" Jeff started angrily.

Ted jerked away from him. "Listen, I'm starting to see it, just like this guy said! I told you about Page that time, and then you got to thinking—"

"Shut up before I knock—"

"Hey, what's the yelling there?" the cabby demanded.

"This guy here!" Ted yelled wildly as Jeff fought to grip his throat. "This guy! He's Barron! I just paid him! Like you said, I see it—"

Jeff slugged him, but it was too late. Ted's head bounced against the door and he rolled off the seat to the floor. The cabby slammed on the brakes and began to yell out the window:

"Cops! Help, Cops! This guy—"

Jeff slugged him twice, ear and ear, but the cabby was tough. He grunted and sagged across the wheel, then came up bawling again in an agonized tone. Jeff threw open the door and plunged across the street. He tore down the steps of the Sixth Avenue subway and bolted into a train as the doors closed. He rode to Fourteenth Street and climbed to the sidewalk.

He cursed Ted's folly, yet even more he cursed his own stupidity and conceit and all the two-bit foxiness that went with it. He'd done everything, *everything*, precisely as Anders had calculated he would: picked up the paper, read the news, and then decided to play it double smart. Instead of walking straight into a police station, he'd gotten his phony face and made like a genius. And gotten himself recognized. Slipped and pranced around until he'd dug himself a perfect hole for a genuine no-mistake grave! A beautiful example of how not to be smart!

Jeff stood stone still. It flashed across his mind that he still had a couple of cards in the game: He knew, or thought he knew, who the murderer was. Second, he knew where a corpse was, or had been, anyway. And Anders did *not* know that he knew those things. So? If Anders kept putting little pieces on top of each other, unaware he was watched . . .

Jeff took a long, shaky breath and mopped his face. "Son," he murmured, "from now on you've got to get results the fast way."

CHAPTER FIVE

Fast and Easy

A COP was coming. Jeff moved into the side street and walked toward Seventh Avenue. If you knew something, you ought to be able to use it, twist it

around to smoke Anders out so . . . Jeff stopped, then snapped his fingers. Anders had been a busy salesman tonight, what with getting his money and probably putting it away. Maybe he hadn't had time for another look at Vestley. And wouldn't he want another look? Wouldn't he want to move it, or add the Barron touch to a frameup?

Jeff started moving fast. He took the I.R.T. subway and got off at Fifty-first Street. He went to Eighth, then downtown to Forty-sixth and east toward the vacant building. The street had assumed the shiny stillness that settles before the dawn. The rain had ended. The soft *smush . . . smush . . . smush* of Jeff's wet shoes was a clear and lonely sound. Never before had he realized how lonely the night in New York could be. . . .

He reached a point directly across the street from the passageway. For twenty minutes he stood there, waiting, listening. At last he crossed the street and touched the heavy door. It was still unlocked. Inside the dusty building he listened again. Even the gnawing rat had gone to sleep.

He moved through the vacant rooms until he reached the room where Thomas Vestley had been. Before he struck the match, he made a desperate wish: Please let him be here, exactly as he was. . . . Please. . . .

The match flamed. Jeff's heart pounded. Nothing, nothing was changed. Or was it? He searched frantically through the pockets. Nothing had been added, nothing removed. Jeff stared around the room. It, too, was the same. So probably Anders had not been back since the murder.

What were the chances? How had it been at the murder? They had met in here. Perhaps Anders had carried a flashlight. He had smashed Vestley's skull. Doubtless he'd waited a few moments and heard no breathing. But was Anders *sure*? Was he so *certain*, that nothing could shake his conviction? Or hadn't he been in a hurry, nervous, working in darkness by flashlight or matches?

And wouldn't he return here? That was the vital key: He had to come back!

Jeff thought of all the questions, fought with all the unknown answers in less than a minute. Then he gritted his teeth and soaked his fingers in the blood on the floor

under Vestley's head. The blood was still moist there. He moved to the door and rubbed the knob; the next room, the next knob; and on out to the door that opened into the night. Then, using his clean hand, he returned to the body and looked around. He hurried through the other rooms until he found the steps leading down to the oil-scented basement. He carried Vestley's body down.

Here in the basement were the grimy furnace, the tanks, broken desks and chairs, piles of crating and boxing material, even a part of a derelict elevator. And here, also, Jeff found a massive door. It was so located that he knew it must lead to Anders' theater.

Jeff shifted the mass of boxes until he had cleared a place far back in a corner. He put Vestley's body there, then heaped the boxes over it and tossed abandoned newspapers over those. Next he prepared a cave-like hiding place for himself under the steps that went up into the building. And then, when that was done, there was nothing to do but wait. And keep waiting and hoping that Anders would return to the corpse.

When he huddled down, he was exhausted. His muscles trembled. He felt cold and starved. He listened and his ears began to ache with the effort. He yearned to sleep forever. He fought to keep his eyes open. Now and then they closed. He almost dozed.

Suddenly his nerves froze. Dimly, softly, he heard the sound of the massive door to the theater closing. Quiet footsteps crossed the basement and climbed the steps over Jeff's head. The door above closed. The muted footsteps crossed the rooms above. Jeff followed them, mentally picturing Anders' position. The footsteps halted.

He was there now looking for the missing corpse!

Jeff heard a stricken gasp. The footsteps lunged over the floor. A door started to open and halted.

Anders was seeing the blood on the knob now and thinking that Vestley had touched that knob! Oh, make him think that, Jeff prayed. Make him fear Vestley isn't dead! Make him, make him!

The footsteps began to thresh again, wildly, from room to room, into the dis-

tance, nearer again, back and forth. Suddenly they pounded into the basement. The beam of a flashlight sprayed the darkness. Jeff could hear the wild breathing of the man. He could hear panting, wordless sounds from the throat. And then, for an instant as the man blundered toward the door, he saw Anders' face, grey-white and thin and burning-eyed.

The door slammed. Anders was gone. Jeff slowly relaxed, and for the first time in an eternity he smiled to himself. "So what now, Anders? And what now, Jefferson, you little genius?"

HE HURRIED from the building and found a telephone in the Times Square subway station. The first grey streaks of dawn were staining the sky. He hunted the number and called the Fiftieth Street Police Station. He did a job on his voice, making it high and almost hysterical:

"Listen, there's a man over here! A guy, I just saw him! Saw him on Forty-sixth Street near Broadway! He . . . No, listen, I'm trying to tell you, this guy—his head's all smashed. Terrible, I mean, and blood and all! This guy, he staggered past me like he couldn't see or hear or anything—sort of falling and staggering. Terrible, see?"

Then Jeff hung up. And wouldn't it be nice, he thought, if Anders stuck around his office in the theater, having a drink for his nerves, until the prowls started running around in front?

He gave the prowls five minutes, then walked up Broadway. Already dawn was giving way to grey morning, and the walks were crowded near the Automat. He stopped at the corner of Forty-sixth Street. A squad car was parked at the curb, pale fumes breathing from the exhaust. A cop hurried out of a drugstore and peered up and down the street. He lit a cigarette and fidgeted. Another cop hurried east from Eighth Avenue. They met and shook their heads. And then—as Jeff's breath turned thin in his throat—Cary Anders appeared and stared at them. He hesitated, half starting toward them, then changed directions and cut across the street to the drugstore.

Asking. Finding out, Jeff thought restlessly.

He reappeared and ducked into a cab. Jeff caught the next one and kept it a block behind Anders' cab until Anders got out at his creamy apartment building on Central Park West.

All the while Jeff found himself thinking backward about Cary Anders. Cary, the musical comedy magician—seven hits in a row when he was less than thirty-five. Then the other way—five straight flops. One divorce, then two. Now a borrowed roll, now no roll at all. Yet, people said he still had it. Give him a good script; give him the talent and turn him loose, and you'd see the stuff again. So Jeff has given him a script six weeks ago. Cary had read it and held his nose. But lousy, Jeff, honey! A rewrite? Maybe. But mainly just lousy. Sorry, Jeff, honey. . . .

Jeff laughed. There was nothing he hated as much as someone calling him Honey. He left his cab and took a long look toward Cary's ninth-floor windows. Was it a straight rye? A martini? Or a sleeping powder and an ice pack?

He gave Cary Anders ten minutes while he drank a cup of coffee and worried a rubbery roll in a Columbus Circle sandwich stand. Then he called Anders again. This time he put his Italian in his voice, straight from the fruit wagon, by way of Broadway.

"This is who? Meester Anders, please, at once! Yes . . . But I do not understand! First he begs me to call you, then no, do not call! But is hurt, you see? . . . No, no, no, I speak of Meester Vestley. *Vestley!* . . . Certainly, since many years I know him, and now he comes here, but trying to crawl up the steps, as where his mother used to live you understand? But injured, and first he says your name and next he says no. I do not understand. The police, perhaps, I should—"

That got results. Anders started asking questions, one before he finished the other: Certainly he was an old friend of Mr. Vestley, and if Mr. Vestley was injured, he demanded to see him immediately! What was the address? The name? By all means, don't excite a sick man by summoning the police! The name and the address again? Please . . .

"Ah, alas!" Jeff cried out. "Later! I call soon, later! He is not well, and now

he falls from the couch! I call you later!"

Even as he hung up, he heard Anders shouting for the address. Jeff took a deep breath and shook his head. It was, he mused, either one very terrible flop, or one beautiful hit. It was also one hell of a way to gamble on your life.

There wasn't much time to think about it. He took a cab and decided on the lower East Side as the right place for Vestley to have returned to. On East Sixteenth Street he found a place that looked bleak enough. Rooms were five and six-fifty a week, depending. Jeff decided to make it a velvet party, and took the six-fifty. It peered into an airshaft on one side and onto a fire escape and an enclosed court on the other. It was not, he reflected, the sort of location you thought of as your last happy home. But here it was.

He pocketed the key and walked downstairs to a trucking company. Before he picked up the phone he played a game with himself, a game in which he pretended he took several straight slugs of twelve-year Scotch, and then he pretended he felt brave. He called Headquarters and asked for Lieutenant Woolley. Lieutenant Woolley was a cop he had known off and on, and the one he came closest to trusting. Lieutenant Woolley was not yet in. Jeff called his apartment and got him out of bed.

"How much do you want to make the headlines?" he asked.

Woolley would like that. Who was this?

"I will give you a hint," Jeff said. "Once upon a couple of years ago a certain reporter told you that a certain tin-horn gambler was sacked in the Gristcoll Hotel, playing poker with what he'd knocked out of a certain safe in Queens. That turned out good, yes? Now, let us assume that this time the same reporter is working the other side of the street. He calls you up and says, remember a couple of years ago when—"

"Jeff? Is it . . . Great God, Jeff," Woolley gasped. "Where are you? Why did you have to make it *me* for this call?"

"Because it's not me for the murder, but I need some fast understanding. Listen hard. Here's where I am, and I'll wait here. . . ."

WOOLLEY got there in twenty-eight minutes in overcoat and pajamas. Jeff talked in the six-fifty room while Woolley listened. He had to start over several times; Woolley wasn't sure he understood. When Jeff finished, Woolley still wasn't sure he understood. He said it was crazy. He said somebody ought to get away from the needle. He said that at least he'd have to call Inspector Turrin. For this they could send him back to a Coney Island beat.

It was ten-thirty in the morning before Inspector Turrin, a short blackish man of brilliant eyes, threw down his cigar and said, "All right, all right, all right! But I am telling you now, it's crazy, you hear me!"

At five minutes after eleven, Jeff made the phone call to Cary Anders. He tried to put the Italian back in his voice. It was harder, knowing there was a gun in the same phone booth with you.

"Meester Anders?" he wailed excitedly. "Is Tonati as before! Tonati, the friend of so long with Meester Vestley and . . . Ah, yes, yes, and I do not know what is the best to do! First he is quiet, as in sleep, then alas, screaming: First your name, then of the police! Surely it is a matter that a doctor should observe. . . . Ah, that will be so kind, indeed! It is the room at the back of the hall. Number 308. You will hurry?"

Mr. Anders said he would hurry for his dear friend, Mr. Vestley.

Turrin kept growling softly in his throat. Jeff kept sweating. The thin Italian-looking detective that Turrin had called kept rubbing his cheeks and sighing patiently.

"It reminds me of the worst vaudeville I ever went to," Turrin said. "However, I was fool enough to laugh. We'll see."

"Pull off your shoes," the Italian-looking detective told Jeff. "They stick up under the sheet."

Jeff slipped them off and pulled the covers up around his ears.

"It's been nearly twenty minutes," Woolley said nervously. "We better be getting in the closet."

"But just remember," Turrin said curtly to Jeff, "that we *are* in the closet. And Mandarro is closer than that."

Jeff nodded and the detective smiled

patiently. Turrin and Woolley vanished inside the corner closet, and Jeff pulled the sheet tighter around his ears and stared at the blank wall. "Going to be rainy again this afternoon," the detective said mildly.

"Isn't that dreadful?" Jeff said sarcastically. "No nice picnic."

"I never liked picnics." Time stretched into forever. "You've got a slow guy on the string," Mandarro said, his voice never altering. "Maybe he's not coming at all."

Jeff wet his lips and squinted his eyes shut. That was the part he wouldn't think about.

"Nearly an hour. Funny that a guy . . ." Mandarro started. Then came a muffled shout from somewhere below. A pounding sounded on the stairs beneath. A man's voice was shouting:

"Fire! Fire!"

Jeff started to turn. He heard Mandarro jerk the door open into the corridor. And precisely then it happened—all at once.

A gun roared. In the same split instant, the glass of the fire-escape window shattered, and Mandarro staggered outward into the hall, his fingers clawing grotesquely at his spine. Jeff heard him crash into the railing and scream thickly. In that queerly frozen instant Jeff saw it all: Anders had started a fire somewhere below to divert attention. His shot had been timed to be lost in the confusion. He would run . . . Then it hit Jeff: *He will run, but first he's going to shoot me, too! He will shoot—*

And Anders shot. All of it happened in only the instant while Mandarro was crashing into the railing, while Jeff was realizing, while Woolley and Turrin were throwing open the closet door. The shot came and Jeff felt it rip into his ribs. He actually heard his own grunt of pain.

Anders was crouched on the fire escape. He had already started to turn, to go. He saw Jeff and something happened to his mouth, to his eyes and all his features, as he realized that this was not Vestley. There was no recognition of Jeff as Jeff—only the glazed realization that something vital and desperate was wrong.

And then Woolley, or perhaps it was

Turrin, fired. Jeff could see the impact of the bullet as it pushed Anders' vest against his chest. Anders was driven back and slammed half erect by the impact, and the second bullet loosened his frozen muscles. He began to windmill his arms slowly as he see-sawed on the rail. Then gravity won. He seemed almost to roll over the rail with the limp grace of a dancer. He vanished and, after what seemed like an eternity, a sound of flesh on concrete came up from the court. And it was over. It was over while the man below was still shouting fire.

Time was a funny thing, Jeff thought crazily. In one span of moments, everything . . . Then he made a clumsy pinching gesture at his ribs and muttered:

"Fast and easy does . . ." He did not finish it.

HE FINISHED it nine days later in the hospital. He was in a wheel chair in the afternoons by then, and Marylyn had sent him a bottle of Scotch. He rolled his chair into Mandarro's room and smiled at the plaster-encased figure.

"Looks like rain this afternoon again," he observed pleasantly. "You know, Scotch is a nice drink. Now, when you get your hands out of those casts, maybe I'll pour you . . . Watch it! Fast and easy does it. You'll break the old bones again, you know."

Mandarro looked at him murderously. It was then that Woolley arrived.

"We got it! The last loose thread: Why did Anders pick *you* for the fall guy? And you want to know why? Just always remember how you used to know me, because listen: That little play you sent him? Well, it wasn't such a stinker. Hollywood wants a little of it. But Anders was making out it was his. The deal would have to cook until you were gone, and then it would be yacht money in the bank. How do you like that?"

Jeff liked it so much he took a gentle look at Mandarro, then rolled his chair over and tipped the bottle at Mandarro's lips.

"See how wrong you were?" he said. "It doesn't look like rain at all. Not today and not tomorrow either. Not for a long, long time. . . ."

DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 28)

and he heard Ben and Hoppy swearing, heard the girl's shrill screaming, and heard, above and beyond these sounds, Joe Whittington's baritone roar.

He rolled his eyes and tried to see without raising his head. It wouldn't work. Then, gripping the edge of the desk, he peeped timidly over the top—in time to see Joe Whittington's huge paw swat the gun from Hoppy's hand.

It went spinning across the carpet and came to rest near another gun—apparently the one that had belonged to the man called Ben. Joe lumbered forward then, his arms swinging free and loose at his sides. As he walked the two men retreated before him, taking tiny, timid steps.

"You fellows," Joe Whittington said. "I am just ashore in this place, having some recreation. You come along and you bother me. More, you break my guitar. I have nothing but anger for you—and I think I will kill you now."

The eyes of Ben and Hoppy were wide and staring, intent on Joe Whittington's face. Now they looked at each other in wild alarm, turned and broke for the door.

Joe's hands shot out like giant black snakes and caught each man by the neck. He jerked his hands back, brought them together sharply, and the skulls of Ben and Hoppy collided with a terribly final sound.

Gravely Joe inspected their faces, then laid them to rest on the floor. Then, turning to Herbie who was still crouched behind the desk, Joe said, "My friend, are you badly hurt?"

Herbie stood up. His office looked like a bargain basement at the end of a busy day. The limp forms of Hoppy and Ben were stretched upon his carpet. Against the wall, the girl was sobbing, her hands in front of her face.

Purely for Joe Whittington's benefit, Herbie pressed one hand to his side. "I think it's just a flesh wound. But we got things to do." Shakily he found a checkbook and scrawled his name, leaving the other lines blank.

He said, "Joe, you straighten things up here. Make it nice and tidy." Then he waddled to the sobbing girl and touched



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her on the shoulder. "Later," he said, "you should cry. Outside of working hours. Right now you run down to the music store. Get the best guitar they got. Money don't mean nothing. All that counts is speed."

The girl said, "I . . ." but it came out a sob. She took the check and hurried out of the office.

Herbie wanted to blubber, too, when he looked at the unconscious gunmen, but he saw that Joe was watching him, and he said as briskly as he could, "Stuff 'em in the closet."

He couldn't stand the dangling arms, the loosely rolling heads, so he went out in the hall and took deep breaths. It didn't help at all.

THE GIRL returned with the new guitar before Jack Telig arrived with Zicker. And when the famous producer came in, Joe Whittington was strumming softly. Herbie's stomach was keeping time to the music in uneasy syncopation.

Zicker, a well-scrubbed man with a nervous tic that kept jumping in one

cheek, looked at Herbie's office and immediately checked his watch. "I have five minutes," he said.

Jack Telig said, "Let's have it, Herb." "Please," Herbie said to Joe Whittington, "you should play like never before."

It is doubtful if Joe had ever played as well as he played just then. Though he might have denied it if asked, his forgotten island ancestors slumbered yet in his blood, and the joy that comes with victory does not change merely because one's enemies carry guns instead of spears.

The emotion crept into his voice and gave it depth and richness. Also, this was the first time Joe had ever held a four-hundred-dollar guitar.

Herbie Carpis looked at Zicker. The producer was leaning forward in his chair. That was good. So he was interested. And maybe in six months, when this boy was built up good. . . Herbie stopped dreaming abruptly as Zicker looked at his watch and stood up.

"But Mr. Zicker. . ." Herbie began in an anguished tone.

"Pleasure, Carpis," the great man said.

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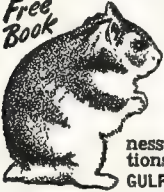
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"Got to run. Telig will arrange terms, contract, what-not. Don't try to hold us up." He threw a nervous grimace at Joe Whittington. "See you out on the Coast, er—son. You have a nice talent. Very nice."

Herbie, no longer able to stand, sank weakly into his chair.

Mr. Zicker placed two fingers upon his own left wrist and stood for a moment, regarding Herbie and the chair. Then, as if satisfied that his pulse, if not satisfactory, was at least strong and regular enough to carry him through the door, he headed in that direction.

There he turned and said, "Envy you, Carpis. Sit here and wait for talent. Soothing atmosphere. Nothing to do but reach for the phone and take your ten percent."

Herbie moved his lips, but nothing came out. Zicker closed the door. Jack Telig opened a briefcase and spread a sample contract on the top of Herbie's desk.

Something was bothering Herbie. He had a gnawing, anxious feeling that something was left undone, but he couldn't pin it down until the phone girl came into the office. Then he said, "That guitar. How much?"

"Four hundred, Mr. Carpis," she told him.

A spasm of pain crossed Herbie's face, and he came out from behind the desk with the smooth, rolling motion of a porpoise topping a wave. "Wait!" he cried to Joe Whittington. "You shouldn't make a scratch." Tenderly he removed the instrument from Joe's hands, inspected it, found it unharmed, and passed it to the girl.

"Take it back," he said, "as fast as you got it. Tell them I changed my mind."

"Same old Herbie," Jack Telig said. "Never pass up a buck."

Herbie nodded absently and began to read the contract. Halfway down the page he paused, as a faint thumping came from the closet. "Hey, Jack," he said. "For guys that smuggle dope and shoot guns do you think they would pay a reward?"

WHAT DO YOU WANT—BLOOD?

(Continued from page 23)

"Don't be silly," I said. "What do you think I am?"

"In love, probably."

"There's always be another Harlow for girls like her," I said. "He didn't put her in the trance. He just helped. She's been in a trance since she was born."

"What's the matter, baby? She turn you down?"

"Don't be like that, Helen," I said. "You know I wouldn't . . . I mean I . . . With us it's . . ."

"Did you say us?"

"That's right. Don't you . . .? I mean, I do, and I thought you did. Don't you . . ."

"Strangely enough," she said, "I do."

"We could go to Nevada, and I could play cards and you could get a divorce," I said. "And then we'd—"

"Wouldn't we, though?" she said. "Stop stammering, Eddie."

I stopped talking, entirely. We understood each other.

THE END

TORPEDO

(Continued from page 104)

Brill admitted weakly. "Hiding out that way I couldn't get another. And I had to kill Peters."

"Did you?" Carson's smile seemed full of derision.

"He was the only eye-witness. If I'd killed him and got away I'd have been in the clear."

"I figured you'd see it that way," Lieutenant Carson said. "You think pretty good, up to a point. But you were wrong about Peters. You were the only eye-witness to the Mallory shooting, Frankie."

"Peters saw me," Brill said with tired anger. "He looked right at me. Do you mean . . ." A terrible suspicion was born in his mind and his voice failed. He was seeing Peters again as he had seen him on the porch, the white face, the glasses, the cane. "No . . ." Brill gasped. "You don't mean he was—"

"Yeah," Carson said. "That's just what I do mean, Frankie. The eye-witness you thought you had to kill was blind as a bat."

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DETECTIVE TALES

(Continued from page 96)

It checks exactly with your Police Special."

"He got the dope on the Latko and Bysten cases from his own blackmailing racket," Ragan added. "He had a good thing there."

Angie Faherty got to her feet. Her face was stiff and cold. "You won't pin that on me," she insisted.

"Angie," Ragan said, "I checked your bank account. I checked two other accounts you have, your charge accounts, the property you bought. We have all the information we need. We know where you lived. We know that your brother did time with Bayless."

"My brother?" Her face went a shade more pale. "What do you know about him?"

"That's easy, Angie," Ragan said gently. "We picked him up today. He was using the name Valentine Lewis. His girl friend talked, plenty."

Later, while they were booking Al Brooks and Angie, Brooks picked up a paper cup from the cooler and drank. Then he squeezed it into a flattened mass, and with his thumb pushed the bottom up through the crumpled cup. It was an unconscious gesture, and noticing it, Stigler rolled his cigar in his lips, and looked over at Ragan. Marcia was standing beside Ragan, her hand through his arm. "What about that officer's wife, Joe? Shouldn't we go see her?"

"You're right. Is it okay, Mark?"

"Sure thing," Stigler agreed. "You two go ahead."

Outside, the air was cool with the after feel of rain, and they walked down to the car and got in without saying much. "Mary's a good friend of yours, isn't she?" Marcia asked.

"One of the best."

"Will she like me?"

"She will, I know."

They rode on in silence for a few minutes. "How about dinner tomorrow, and a show?"

"All right, and we'll have the dinner at my place!" she said quickly.

Ragan hoped they'd never get to the show.

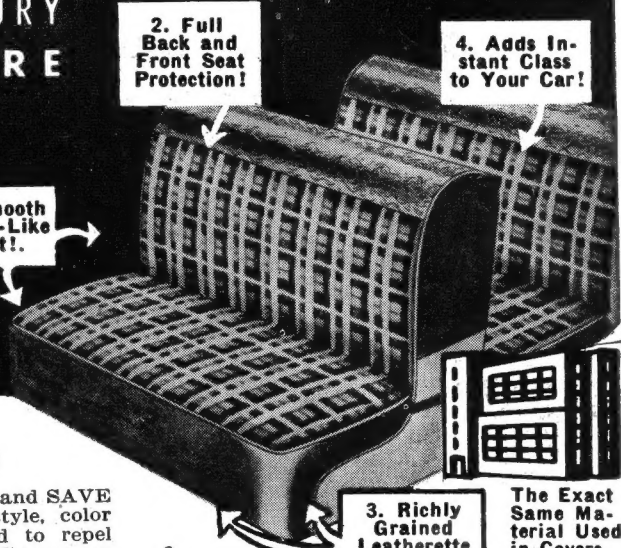
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